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WESTERN ACTION

MARCH

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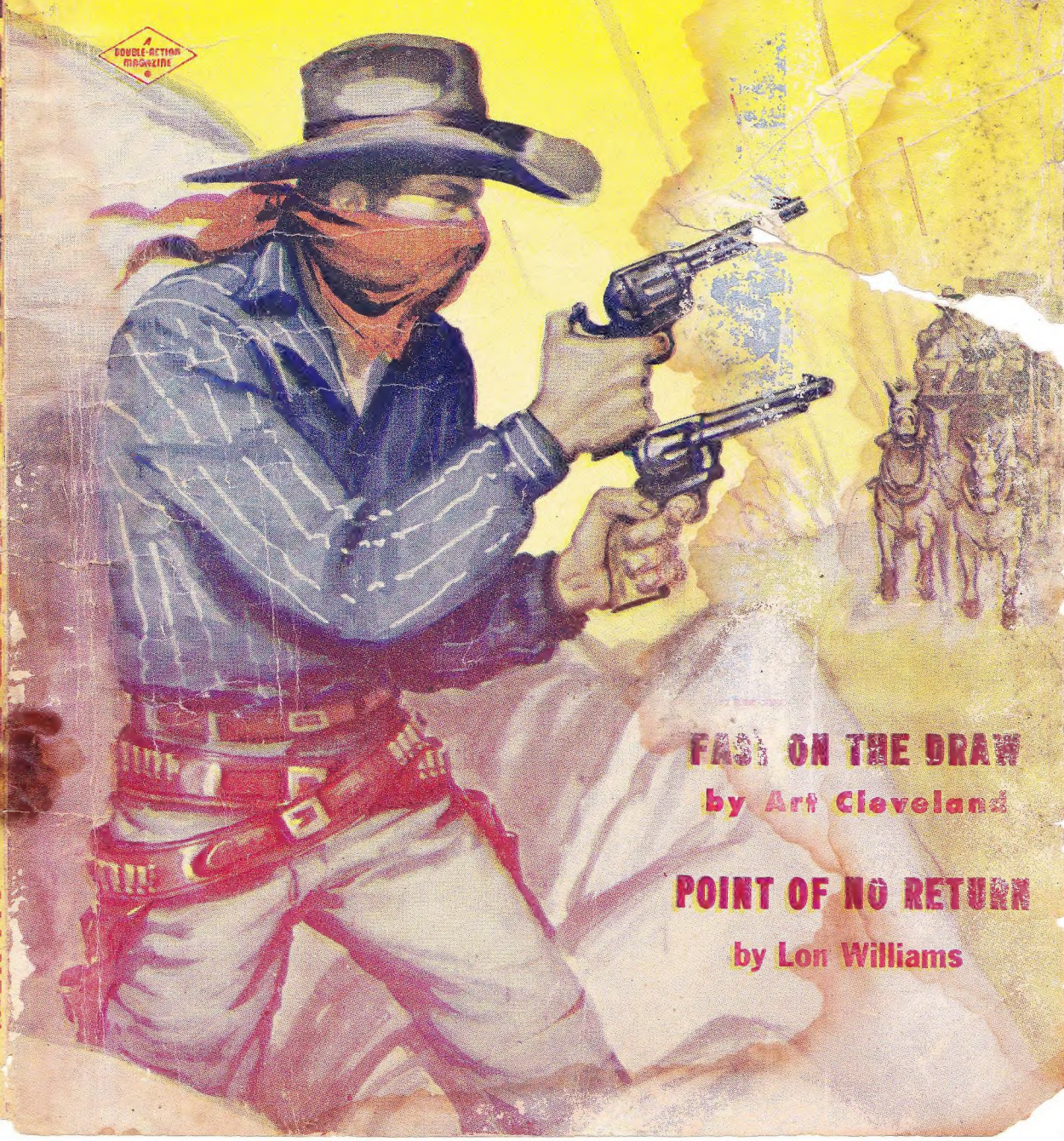
A DOUBLE-ACTION MAGAZINE



FAST ON THE DRAW
by Art Cleveland

POINT OF NO RETURN
by Lon Williams

MARCH 1958
WESTERN ACTION
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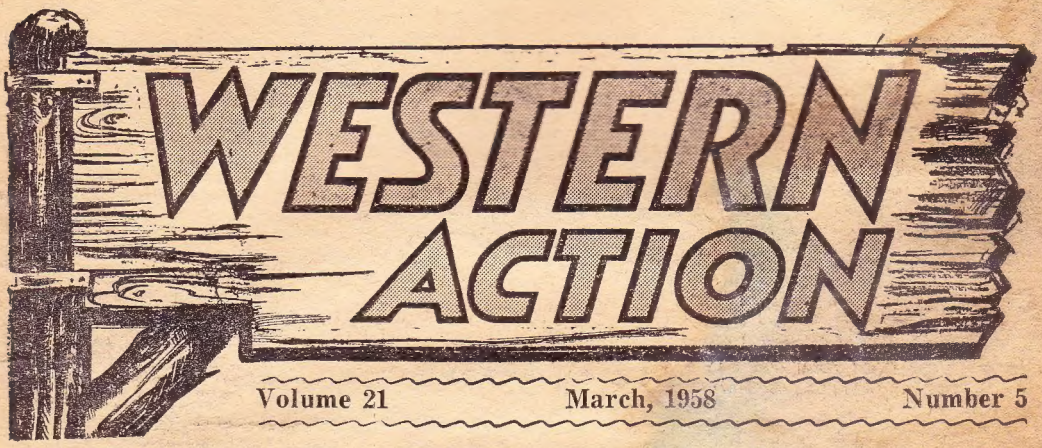

Volume 21 March, 1958 Number 5

Featured Novel

FAST ON THE DRAW ..... Art Cleveland 8
Johnny Mill didn't know anyone in Relton, but they seemed to know him and he wondered if the man he sought, Boyd Harkin, had anything to do with it. Then he found that he was being mistaken for someone else—in fact, for the very man he was trailing!

Other Stories and Features

STAGE TO PERDITION ..... Len Turner 6
The story of one of the greatest oldtime stage drivers—Hank Monk.

POINT OF NO RETURN (Judge Steele story) ..... Lon Williams 44
A killing had resulted from this stagecoach robbery, so the man on trial was being charged with murder. But William Shore claimed that he had changed his mind before the crime occurred, and though he might be involved in the plans, he'd taken no part in the crime itself.

THE SCHOOL DAYS OF COWBOY SWOKE (verse) .... G. A. Edwards 55
Sight of the teacher made him turn, and with a thirst for knowledge burn.

HOPELESS RANGE (Novelet) ..... E. E. Clement 56
Steve Dill had hunches now and then, and it was one of these that brought him to Blackhawk. Then another hunch told him he'd never leave alive...

THE CASE OF WILD BILL BLY (verse) ..... Edward Garner 73
Lead pills would cure his ills for sure...

WILDERNESS POSSE ..... Frank Richardson Pierce 74
Sam Condon particularly disliked Jim Wyatt as a rival—but perhaps if the awkward lug could be made to look ridiculous...

ROBERT A. W. LOWNDES, *Editor* MARIE ANTOINETTE PARK, *Asso. Ed.*

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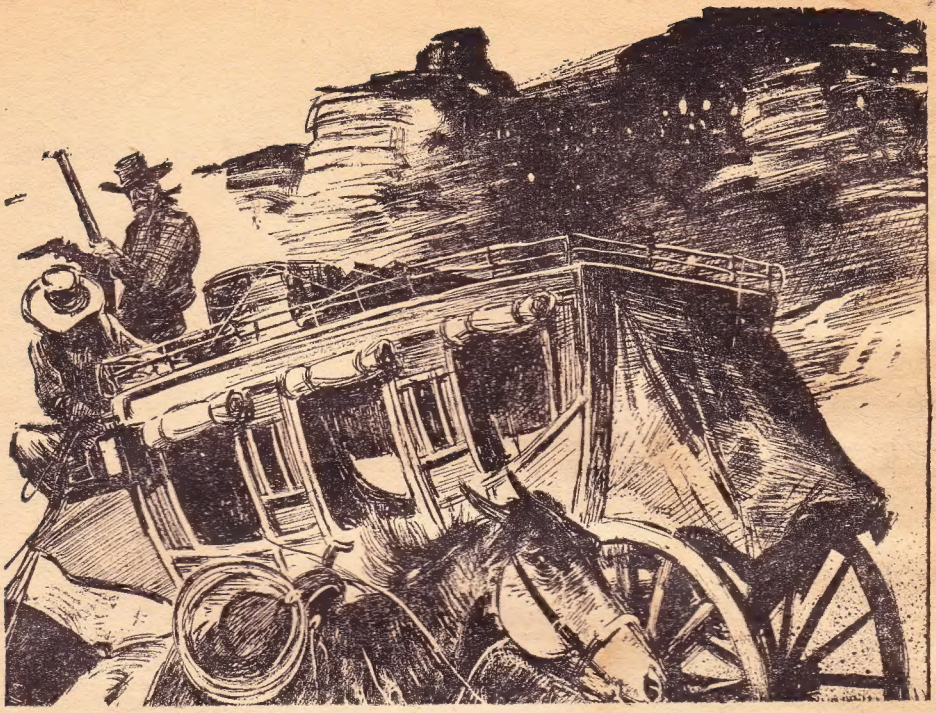

STAGE TO PERDITION

Special Feature

by Len Turner

THE STAGE thundered around the mountain, the two teams on a wild gallop. Driver Hank Monk cracked his long lash over the backs of the leaders, demanding even more speed from the running horses.

A man stuck his head out of the window. "Hey, you fool!" he shouted, hanging onto his derby hat with one hand, the other braced against the lurching of the Concord. "You tryin' to kill us off!"

"We'll be late into Auburn," Hank Monk hollered, "unless I get some speed out of these nags!" Suddenly he cried, "Hang on, passengers, there's a boulder ahead!"

A huge granite boulder had toppled down to block the stage-road. The front team leaped over it, but the rear team got snagged, and the stagecoach slid, swung to one side, and overturned.

There was the threshing of horses, fighting against their harnesses—squealing, struggling horses. The passengers screamed and there was dust and gravel. Hank Monk was thrown from his high seat. But he held onto the lines as he hit the gravel, and when he got to his feet—bruised and shaken—he still held the ribbons. The back team struggled to its feet, but the stage still lay on its side. Only the teams, standing on the narrow road, kept it from sliding off into the ravines, for the reach had not broken.

"Steady, boys," the old stage driver said. "Take it easy. Back up a little, boys—there, that's it, horses!"

His words calmed the horses and, this done, he went to the stage, got on it, and pulled open the door.

"Anybody hurt down there?"

[*Turn To Page* 7]

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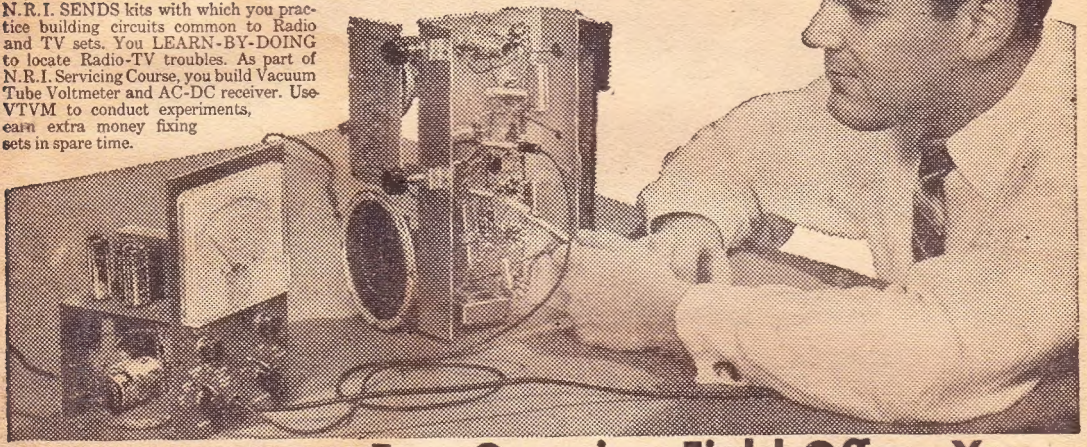

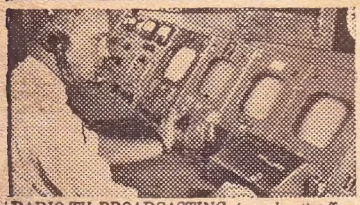

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Stage To Perdition

(*continued from page 5*)

One by one the passengers climbed out. Two women, one man—and a boy of about seven. The women were trembling with fear—the boy was wide-eyed with wonder—and the man was mad.

"I warned you to slow down, driver! I'll sue this company from here to billy-hell! You had no call to drive this stage at such a break-neck speed..."

"Had to make connections with the Auburn stage, like I said. Well, I'll unhitch the lead team, ride into the next junction, and get help out to you folks. Just take it easy, people."

A few minutes later, bruised and battered, Hank Monk rode down the trail, astraddle the off-lead horse. When he got to the next depot he told about the wreck. "Boulder slid down," he explained. "Nothing hurt...except a drummer's feelings."

The salvage crew hooked a team to a wagon and loaded in chains and rope. "You're comin' back with us, ain't you, Hank?"

But Hank Monk slowly shook his grizzled head. "I'm through with stage-drivin'...forever."

They stared in amazement. Hank Monk, the great driver, giving up the ribbons? Hank Monk, the man who had gained fame by his tongue, his expert handling of plunging teams? Hank Monk was quitting? No, it couldn't be true!

But it was true.

HANK MONK was a brave man and, like many brave men, he liked to joke and laugh. Every time he finished a run, he had a joke for the handlers. He had wandered into San Francisco in 1852. Whether he had come around the Straits of Magellan, or had hiked across Panama, or had trekked overland nobody seems to know. But most everybody agreed—later—that he was indeed an efficient stage-coach driver.

He applied for a job at the California Stage Company's office, and he did his first driving on the Auburn-Sacramento run, and there were many passengers to be hauled, for at this time the gold rush was at a high frenzy. But this country was rather level—the foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountains—and young Hank craved for a more adventuresome run.

"I'd like to run from Genoa, Nevada, up the east side of the Sierras," he told the manager. "I'm tired of this level country."

"You mean that, Hank?"

"Sure I do. I know you've got a hard time keepin' drivers out of Genoa, because the run is so tough. I could use the bonus and a little excitement."

"You got the run, Hank," the manager said, breathing a little prayer. His best driver, of his own accord, was taking the roughest run! This was indeed his lucky day!

Hank later said he enjoyed the run out of Genoa. It was the most difficult bit of road on the Overland's route. Suddenly the Sierras reared their lofty heights upward to pierce the blue California sky. The trial was narrow, the terrain rough; there were many sharp bends, and below were canyons thousands of feet deep. Here was excitement enough for any man! And for Hank Monk—a man of medium height with brown hair and brown eyes—this was the life!

Here, on this run, he stumbled and lurched his way into fame. And that fame came to him because Horace Greeley, the great New York editor, was one day his passenger.

This was in 1859. Greeley was making a trip across the United States, probably feeling out the "grass-root"

[*Turn To Page 92*]

FAST ON THE DRAW

Novel of Outlaw Cunning

by Art Cleveland

The vengeance trail led Johnny Mill into Relton, where he found two things right off the bat. First, he saw a girl he knew he wanted to marry; second, he found himself contacted by rustlers who mistook him for the very man Mill sought — Boyd Harkin!

JOHNNY MILL went looking for a man and found a woman. His search for the man took him across three States to the wide cattle country of western Arizona, and something in his steely calmness as he asked questions seemed to bode ill for Boyd Harkin. But news of Harkin's movement was sometimes honestly vague, and sometimes purposely false, so that Johnny Mill drifted into Relton without quite knowing whether he was on the trail or not.

But there he found the woman.

He hadn't been looking for her, yet since away back before this search began he had been looking for her. The way most every man looks for a woman, knowing that when he finds her a part of his life will be ended and another part beginning. That was the way of it with Johnny Mill.

The woman was young, sitting the seat of a buckboard that rattled along the main street of Relton. She had bright brown hair that tumbled richly from under her sombrero to caress her shoulders, and in the sunlight her eyes flashed very blue. She was small, yet strong and full-breasted, her curves held proudly beneath a mannish check shirt, her brown legs bare from buckskin skirt to neat little riding boots.

Johnny froze in the act of hitching his black horse outside the *Wildcat Saloon,* watching the girl go past. Her eyes met his for a short moment, slid over his lean length of body, then flashed away.

An old-timer leaned against a veranda post enjoying the sun's warmth, and he looked the kind who could and would tell you the history of any given person at a moment's notice. With his gaze still on the rattling buckboard, Johnny sidled to the old man and said, "Who is she, fella?"

"Huh? What's that?"

"The gal— the one on the buckboard. Who else?" Johnny was impatient. "D'you know her? Is she from around these parts?"

The old-timer squinted after the vanishing wagon and chuckled.

"Ah—her? She's Miss Dorman. Valerie Dorman, daughter o' old Jake Dorman what owns the Circle D. Heck, everybody knows the Dormans."

"Big outfit, huh?" Johnny asked. "Lot of beef? Lot o' riders?"

"Nope. Not big folks at all, the Dormans. Ol' Jake's got his troubles like most folks, I guess—money troubles mostly. No, sir, them Dormans ain't well knowed because they're rich. It's jus' that they're danged respectable folks an' liked by most everybody, if you get what I mean. Kinda friendly like."

"Sure, sure. But look—that Miss Dorman—she ain't spoke for, is she? I mean, there ain't nobody fixin' to put a rope an' brand on her. . ."

"Hell!" the old boy said, spitting tobacco juice. "You're kinda eager, ain't you. You mean business, huh?" He chuckled heartily. "Wal, if you can corral that gal you're a plumb better man 'an the other young bucks around here. Ain't none of 'em what ain't throwed a rope at her, one time or another. She jus' ain't interested, I reckon."

"A fella can only try," Johnny Mill said. "An' when I try, I try danged hard. Back home some folks call me downright stubborn."

HE LEFT the old-timer chuckling, and swung into the saloon. The *Wildcat* was beginning to fill up for the sundown trade, the barkeeps sliding drinks to meet the unending thirst. Johnny Mill edged into a place at the bar, bought a whisky, and right away became an object of interest to the

squat, hard-faced man at his right elbow.

The squat man had a protruding stomach that built up into a barrel-like chest. His arms were immense, the bulk of them testing the strength of the sleeves that snugged them. His eyes were small and squinting; his nose was twisted off-center; and at his left thigh he toted a .45 with a huge redwood butt. He looked at Johnny Mill as if there were secret thoughts in his head, or as if he was wondering about something.

His opening remark was inevitable. "Stranger, huh? I ain't seen you around before."

"Jus' drifted in," Johnny said. "Plumb busy town you got here."

"Sure is. Center o' the western Arizona cattle country. You—you come far, stranger?"

"Purty far," Johnny said.

"You talk like you was a Texan," the heavy man said thoughtfully. "Me, I done spent some years along the Pecos, an' you talk powerful like the folks back there."

"You got me," Johnny said. "I'm from west o' the Pecos."

"That's what I figured." And there was something about the way he said that, and Johnny Mill looked at him and saw the knowing shadow of mirth in his eyes. The squat man said, "You fixin' to stay awhile?"

This was something beyond normal curiosity, and Johnny didn't like people who nosed into his business. He said, "That depends. Mebbe yes, mebbe no."

He tossed off the drink, strolled away; and because he was saddle-weary, and not up to looking for a room in this crowded town for awhile, he relaxed on a vacant chair beside a gaming table.

Then he saw the squat man, pushing out from the crowd at the bar and making toward him. It was a bit too much for Johnny, and a few choice words of discouragement formed in his mind. But before he could utter them the squat man was sitting beside him and chuckling softly, sort of confidentially.

"Don't blame you for bein' kinda careful," he told Johnny. "Us kinda hombres can't take chances with strangers, huh? But it's all right, fella. I'm Steener. Cal Steener."

"You are, huh?" Johnny said. "That's fine...that's dandy. I never heard o' you."

"I know you never," Steener grinned. "That's got nothing to do with it." He leaned closer, that confiding chuckle rumbling again. "I'm one o' Wolf Yates' boys, see. Wolf sent me. He's kinda expectin' you."

Johnny Mill was getting tired of this loco game. He said, "Look, I never heard o' Wolf Yates, either, so mebbe you plumb better run along and..."

"What?" Steener jerked back in his chair, his little eyes searching yet doubtful. He said, slowly, "It's one o' three things. I'm talkin' to the wrong man...you're jokin'...or you're the danged most cautious hombre I ever came across. Stranger, would the name Boyd Harkin mean anythin' to you?"

"Boyd Harkin!" Johnny repeated the name on impulse, the excitement streaking through him to flush his face and tighten the lines of his mouth.

Cal Steener relaxed, a relieved grin on his broad and fleshy face. He said, "Harkin, you sure had me worried for a minute. I thought I'd been gabbin' to the wrong fella. You sure are a plumb careful hombre, but that's all right. You had to be sure, huh? Wolf likes his boys to be careful, anyway. In our game it pays, huh?"

Mill listened, an instinctive part of him controlling his tongue while his excited brain tried to sort out the thoughts.

"What's the next move, now you've found me?"

"Wolf's at his cabin up on Saddleback, north o' here," Steener said.

"We'll go there. But there ain't no hurry. I guess you're saddle-tired an' hankerin' for a rest, huh? We can hit the trail in the mornin'."

Then Steener said something about getting to know each other and there was no better way than over a drink. Seeing that they were going to work together, and all. And he strode heavily to the bar to buy whiskies, leaving Johnny a few moments to sum up this situation.

BOYD HARKIN, the man he'd searched three States for, was fixing to join in some kind of work with a gang run by this Wolf Yates'. And Steener thought that Johnny Mill was Harkin. That was the set-up. It fitted in with Johnny's yearning to meet Harkin, too. It was a sure way of meeting him. But there was a weakness.

What about Yates? Did he know Harkin by sight, or was it a long-distance arrangement between men who had never met? That was something to find out before he went to Yates' cabin on Saddleback. He still grappled with the problem as Cal Steener waddled back with the drinks.

"Fact is, these are on Wolf," the squat hombre said. "He tol' me to look after you an' make you welcome an' tossed me the dinero to do it."

Plainly, the coming Harkin was thought of as a man of some importance. Could it mean that Harkin and Yates were old friends?

"You didn't take long to pick me out, Steener," Mill said, launching his investigation. "I hardly breasted that bar before you was on to me. How come? I guess Wolf must've give you a purty good description o' me, huh?"

Steener grinned and shrugged, mighty pleased with himself.

"I jus' kinda used my head. Had to. Wolf couldn't give no description of you, seein' that you sure didn't send a picture o' yourself with the letter, huh? But I was lookin' for a new face an' someone from Texas; an' when I see you mosey into here all covered with traildust, and when I hear you ask for a drink in that ol' Texan drawl..." He chuckled again "In our business a fella's gotta use his head or he's no danged good, huh?"

"You're plumb right," Johnny agreed. So Yates didn't know Harkin by sight. That was fine. That was dandy.

Minutes later the two men were on the street. Steener saw to the feeding and cleaning of Johnny's horse in the town corral, then led him to the room over the store. There Johnny dumped his gear, cleaned himself up, then went with Steener to a cafe for a meal.

The safest thing, he figured, would be to let Steener do all the talking. When Steener had finished playing with a rather scared waitress' hand, Johnny went to work to induce talk.

"How's business going?" he asked, smiling knowingly. "Wolf's business, I mean."

Through a large mouthful of steak, Steener said, "Fine. Like I said before, we're organized good, see. We got a way o' gettin' the stuff hid quick, an' a way of gettin' it drove outa the country secret like." I... I don't rightly know how much I oughta tell you, Harkin, seein' that you're here for a kinda special job an' won't have nothin' to do with the cattle part of it. I'll leave it to Wolf, I guess. If he wants to tell you things...wal, he's the boss, ain't he? I don't mean no offence, Harkin. You savvy?"

"SURE, SURE," Johnny said, thinking of cattle being hidden quickly and driven out of the country secretly, and knowing all he wanted to know. But that "kinda special" job he was in for, that had him worried.

He said, "Sure, I ain't aimin' to nose into what's none o' my business, Steener. I'll be kinda busy givin' Wolf his money's worth of service, anyway. I always aim to give value."

"When you're dealin' with Wolf Yates, that's the safest idea," Steener grinned. Then he chuckled. "Money's worth o' service, huh? Wal, that's one way o' putting it. You know Harkin, I sometimes figure that you gunslicks have got the best end o' things. I mean, the pay's good an' the jobs few an' far between. An' even when a job comes up, it's over quick. Us hombres what do the...the field work...we work danged hard for our dinero."

"You plumb should've learned to throw a gun," Johnny said. "All it takes is practice."

Steener nodded, waving a forked potato. "An' speed," he said. "And guts. Me, I've got the guts. But I wasn't built for fast movin', Harkin. You only gotta look at me to see I couldn't be fast, huh?"

Johnny didn't answer. There was some other quality in Steener's voice now, something sly and velvety yet too vague to be pinned down. Anyway, Johnny Mill still wanted to know about that special gunslick's job he was supposed to do.

He was wondering how he could broach the subject again when he saw a sudden tenseness in Steener, and saw the small dark eyes gazing fixedly at along the row of tables in the cafe. Johnny followed the gaze.

Down there near the door a tall, moustached hombre, with wild ginger hair and grimly lined face was sliding on to a chair at a vacant table. Across the tables between, Johnny saw the newcomer lock gazes with Steener for a moment, then glance curiously at Johnny.

After that, the red-haired man took no further notice, and at Johnny's side Steener resumed his eating. But he said to Johnny, "There's one reason Wolf hired you, Harkin...that red-thatched coyote what jus' came in. He's been gettin' in our hair of late, an' Wolf don't stand for that. Likely he'll have you fix that guy first off."

"Yeh?" Johnny said. "Who is he?"

"Red Ames," Steener said. "Red Ames, Marshal o' Relton."

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THAT NIGHT, in the darkness of the room over the store, while Cal Steener snored in another bed near by, Johnny Mill did some serious thinking. The more he thought about it, the more he was convinced that he'd drifted into a bad situation.

Mention of Boyd Harkin had done it, of course. Johnny wanted Harkin badly, and when they met it would be a fast two-way blast of lead. So far, Harkin hadn't seemed keen to face up to it, and Johnny was danged tired of riding the long trails looking for the man.

I've got to stick around, he thought. *Guess there's nothin' for it but to go through with this masquerade for awhile.* He hoped he'd be able to handle the explosive situation when Harkin showed up. On that none-too-comforting thought he slept.

In the morning he and Steener breakfasted at the cafe. Steener played with the waitress's wrist again, leering up at her, and it made Johnny uneasy to watch him. The girl was a pretty one, tallish and slim, with velvet black hair playing up the white smoothness of her face and the largeness of her dark eyes. Steener called her Beth, his great paws worrying her. Johnny could see that she was very frightened of him.

Steener watched after her as she escaped from him at last, his tiny eyes narrowed to slits. He said, "Touchy little gal, huh? But she does somethin' to me, that one. You know ...up there on Saddleback a man gets

mighty lonesome at times. Mighty lonesome!"

Johnny changed the subject with a brisk question: "You figurin' to pull out this morning?"

Steener nodded. "Guess we better. It's a twelve-hour ride to the cabin, an' we don't wanta have to climb them mountain trails after dark."

They saddled their horses in the town corral, and rode back to the store. They humped their gear down from the room and were strapping saddlepacks in place when Johnny Mill heard the rattle of an approaching buckboard. He turned his head to see Valerie Dorman's strong and pretty face, framed in that sombrero and rich brown hair.

The buckboard drew almost level, its team of horses walking, and as the girl turned her gaze to him his hand went to his hat. He swept the sweat-stained hat from his brown brow and smiled at her. And in that moment he saw her gaze flick to Steener, harden, and flick back at Johnny with brief but pungent contempt.

Then she looked straight ahead as the buckboard, loaded with provisions, rattled toward the west trail out of town.

Steener hadn't noticed the girl or Mill's interest in her, for which Johnny was glad. He jammed his hat back on his head and hoped for his burning face to fade to its normal color. That brief, stinging contempt in the girl's eyes had stabbed right into him.

A moment later the men swung to the saddles and loped easily out of Relton, taking the north trail toward the mountains.

Johnny took a lot of notice of that trail, planning for the day when he might have to use it alone, and kind of sudden. It snaked away to the hills which, some miles ahead, climbed in rugged layers to the Saddleback.

The Saddleback Mountain was obvious and could be picked out even before Relton had dropped out of sight behind. A great shallow pass between two lofty ridges, it looked so close that it was hard to associate it with a twelve-hour ride.

The rest of the mountain range rambled in a line almost south to north, losing itself in the distance in both directions. The rich Arizona cattle country was west of the mountains, in a grassy circle spreading north-to-west-to-south around Relton. From the number of cowhands and ranchers he'd seen in Relton, Johnny knew that there were many spreads out in that territory. He thought of the Dorman's Circle D, marvelling that he'd forgotten to ask that old-timer about its location.

AN HOUR later, Steener broke his brooding silence. He reined his mount back on the crumbling edge of a ridge and pointed away to the north toward a wide mountain trail upon which movement and dust could be seen.

"The boys've been busy," he said.

Johnny Mill squinted his eyes to the distance and to their keen young sight the movement was plain enough.

"Cattle," he said. "Bein' drove up into the mountains, huh? Purty big week's work, mebbe."

"Purty big," Steener said. "A herd by the look o' that dust."

He said no more, resuming the climb in silence, leaving Johnny to weigh things in his mind.

The main climb ended and they loped up the gentle, smoother slope of the Saddleback. There was a clear trail through rich, tall timber, and beyond the timber the guardian peaks stood yellow in the dying sunlight.

The trail snaked for maybe a mile, then opened to a wide clearing in the forest. The clearing was dotted with small log buildings, and Steener led the way toward the biggest. They loped past a corral in which ran good horseflesh, and Johnny saw the move-

ment of men about one or two of the smaller buildings.

Outside the big cabin the two men dismounted. Steener said, "Here's where you meet the boss. We'll see to the hosses later."

He led Johnny into the cabin, carelessly pushing open the unlocked door. A small, very lean man, with high forehead and a thin black moustache, got up from a chair. He flashed his teeth in a smile.

"Back already, Cal, huh?" he said, but not even glancing at the squat man. "So this is the gunslinger, huh?"

He strode lightly forward, his movements somehow careless yet tigerish, suggestive of much strength in a small body. He shook hands with Johnny Mill and there was no doubt about the strength of his grip.

"You don't look like a gunman, Harkin," he said, flashing that smile again.

"Like I said to Steener," Johnny replied, "who does?"

"Yeh...you're right. Waal, you sure didn't waste any time gettin' here. That's the way I like it, Harkin. That's my way, too. When there's somethin' to be done, do it. Huh?"

HE MOTIONED Johnny to a chair and took one himself. He said, "I've got a couple o' jobs lined up an' we might as well talk about 'em. Dinner'll be a while yet.... I'm short-handed with help jus' now, most o' the boys bein' out on a job."

"We done seen the herd on the mountain trail," Steener said, rolling himself a cigaret and flopping his bulk on a chair. "A good haul, it looked like."

Wolf Yates nodded off-handedly, like a bussinessman who, when told that business is good treats it as something he'd every right to expect.

"I'll give you a hundred dollars a month while you're here, with a special bonus every time you do a job. That's my way. All my boys get a monthly wage, with a bonus each time I sell a herd o' beef. Your bonus'll be higher, Harkin, on account o' your job bein' kinda specialised."

"That's dandy, that's fine," Johnny said. But he had a part to play, he had to make himself seem authentic. He said, "Jus' how much was you figuring?"

"The bonus?" Yates looked at him keenly, and threw out a bid. "I'll make it...a hundred dollars a time. On top o' your hundred a month, of course."

"No fooling!" Johnny Mill grinned. He got up, jammed his hat on his head and turned for the door.

"Where're you going?"

"Back to Texas," Johnny said. "Nice to've met you."

"All right, all right," the rustler said. "I'll make it two hundred dollars a time."

"Double it," Johnny drawled. "I use hundred-dollar bills to play poker with."

"Three hundred," Yates said. "Three hundred each bonus...and jobs purty often. How's that, damn you!"

Johnny figured the game had gone far enough. He took off his hat and sat down again, and Yates flashed his smile.

"That's settled, then. An' your first man is Marshal Ames of Relton. That hombre's been a threat ever since he was elected six weeks ago."

He went on to tell a story that wasn't new to the West, the story of an election in which a crooked, bribe-taking lawman was replaced by a man who couldn't be bribed.

It had been a serious blow to the rustling gang. No longer could they count on marshal and deputies to ride the other way when ranchers reported losses of beef. No longer could they depend on lawmen to take a lenient view of things when honest cowpunchers were shot dead. Red Ames, in fact, had even gone so far as to promise the Cattlemen's Association that he would

clean up the rustling menace once and for all.

OVER DINNER in the cabin, Johnson again spoke about the urgency of killing Marshal Ames. He said, "You can leave tomorrow, huh? Do it anyway you like—I'm not tryin' to tell you your business—only do it quick. All right?"

Johnny Mill agreed. There was nothing else he could do.

After the meal, Yates said, "I guess the boys'll be back durin' the night or early hours o' morning, and there're no cabins vacant. You'd better double with Cal tonight. He's got two bunks in his cabin."

Steener said, "Sure, that'll be all right, for one night. He'll have to get a place of his own when he comes back, though. I'm kinda plannin' another guest for my cabin."

"Don't take any notice of Cal," Johnson laughed. "He's been feelin' kinda romantic lately, likes to dream sweet dreams."

Johnny Mill breakfasted at sun-up, had his pack loaded, and was ready to pull out. He went to Yates' cabin to say goodbye, and the rustler chief had a roll of ten-dollar bills waiting for him.

"Here's your first hundred in advance," he said with the wide smile. "You'll get the bonus after the job's finished." Then he handed Johnny a book and pencil, and said, "I'm a business man and I don't leave things to chance. Hombres have sometimes been foolish enough to try doublin' up on me. Now I make my boys sign for their money." He pointed to a dotted line. "Sign there."

Mill counted the money. Then he took the pencil, remembered in the nick of time that he was supposed to be Boyd Harkin, and signed accordingly.

He grinned at the outlaw chief, and turned for the door. As he reached it Yates called to him, softly.

Johnny turned back and saw the menacing Colt in the rustler's small fist. Wolf Yates said, "If you move a finger toward your gun I'll blast you to hell...you snoopin' polecaet!"

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JOHNNY MILL stood there, all movement frozen, knowing that somehow he'd been found out and the game was up, and secretly surprised at the icy calmness with which he was accepting it.

His brain was calm and clear and he knew that, to gain time, he had to try to bluff it out. He split his lean face in a smile and drawled, "What kinda game's this? You jokin' or something?"

"I'm dead serious," Wolf Yates said, "as you'll find out if you move the wrong way. An' it's you who're playin' a game. You're not Boyd Harkin at all."

Johnny went to speak, but the rustler raised his voice to a surprising bellow, demanding Cal Steener's presence.

Steener came hurrying from a corral. He lumbered into the cabin, and stared at the scene. Yates snapped, "Cal, take his gun. Then start explaining!"

It was Yates, the leader talking, and it was Steener the follower who obeyed. With Johnny's forty-five tucked into his belt he looked at Wolf Yates.

"What is this, boss? What d'you want me to explain?"

"Why you brought this damned imposter here."

Steener looked confused, and Johnny took the opportunity to say quickly, "He's loco, Steener. He thinks I ain't Harkin."

"And you're not," the rustler

snapped. "You fell into a trap, polecat. You don't really believe that I ask all my boys to sign for their wages, do you? Half of 'em can't write anyway."

"Wal, now," Johnny said, his brain racing, "I did figure it was kinda queer."

"I can tell you something that's queerer. Your handwritin's changed. Yes sir, it's changed some! You're not the hombre I wrote to and had letters from makin' the deal. So start talkin', fella. Who the hell are you?"

Johnny searched his brain for words. Cal Steener was staring at him and shaking a baffled head. He said, "But boss...he's a Texan, he's got the Texan way o' talkin'—"

"There're thousands of driftin' Texans, you fool! All right, stranger, I'm waitin' to hear you say somethin'."

"All I can say," Johnny drawled calmly, "is that you're gettin' plumb het up about nothin' and makin' a danged fool o' yourself. The handwriting's easy to explain. When I wrote to you from Texas I had a bad hand an' had to get somebody to write for me. Chopped my right hand with an axe an' mussed it up some. Look..." he held out his right hand, chuckling easily..." you see the scar, still kinda tender."

Doubt flooded the faces of Yates and Steener as they crowded forward to look—and up went that lean hand like a hammer, the fist suddenly tight, smashing into Wolf Yates' face while the Texan's other hand snatched at the Colt.

THE OUTLAW leader staggered with a strangled cry and Steener swore and went for his gun. Johnny wrenched that Colt from the leader's grip and swung it in an arc to gunwhip Steener. Blood streaked Steener's big face as his own gun came into his hand. He crashed a shot as Johnny smashed his Colt upward for a crack at the big man's chin.

The bullet fanned Johnny's cheek as Steener collapsed. Then Wolf Yates gathered himself off the wall he'd been smashed to, and there was a swift movement and Johnny Mill ducked instinctively. A knife bit hard into the log wall behind him and quivered there. Johnny threw a shot at Yates and the rustler spun crazily on his feet. Before he'd hit the floor Johnny Mill was out in the open and running for his horse.

He took the saddle in a running leap and whooped at his mount, kicking for action. Men came running from other cabins and hot lead whined about the Texan. He headed his mount for the trail, at the south end of the clearing.

He swerved the horse about, making a difficult target for the guns that blasted after him. He swung to pass a cabin from which a man had run, gun in hand. Johnny saw the gun come up to shoot and he beat the shot with a hurried throw of his own. He saw the hombre go down and the next moment he was at the trail opening, and heeling the big black for all the speed he could find.

Now it would be a long chase, he knew, but at least he'd gained a good start. None of the rustlers had been ready to ride, none of the horses saddled. They would lose precious minutes saddling up. Johnny made the most of those minutes, beating his mount along the trail through the timber beyond which, to east and west, the twin peaks towered in the morning sun.

He made the winding mile out of the forest and over the edge of Saddleback. Then he was plunging downhill.

He swore at the bad luck of being found out at the last moment. He'd planned to take his time back to town, to loaf slowly along the trail in the hope that he might meet Boyd Harkin climbing it. Now here he was doing the opposite, riding toward town at

breakneck speed. He began to curse the moment he'd ever set eyes on Steener. From then, everything had gone wrong.

Now the downtrail was narrow and rougher, dropping steeply in places with a lot of rubble underfoot. For the next few miles he would have to be satisfied with a walking gait, but, of course, when his pursuers came along they would have to do the same.

He reined back for a moment, and sure enough there were sounds of hoofs behind and above, and angry voices. Johnny Mill knew that if they caught him he would die pronto.

He tried to make better time, but at one narrow ledge his mount stumbled in the loose gravel, and nearly went over the edge. After that Johnny was satisfied with the old pace, looking south across the distance at where Relton sprawled, a cluster of grey buildings that looked closer than they were.

The ride up had taken twelve hours, and the ride down would take about nine, Johnny figured. He longed for the safety of Relton. Then he thought: What safety?

It was a chilling thought, but the truth. Those rustlers would crowd into town after him, of course. And they would get him. He didn't know them all by sight, but they would know him. And a bullet in the night could be managed easily enough.

It was enough to make him doubt whether he ought to go to Relton. Then he remembered the honest Marshal, Ames, whose life was in danger, and decided to go if only to warn him.

NOW HE'D come out of a walled-in section of trail and was passing along an open ridge. Something buzzed by his head and something else spattered the rock at his left, and a split second later two cracking shots echoed in the hills. Rifle fire!

That was something he hadn't banked on, and now, as other long-distance slugs burned the air, he recklessly plunged his horse off the ridge. With more rifle shots cracking along the hills, the black cayuse scrabbled down a steep slope where rocky rubble scattered underfoot.

But at least Johnny was now out of sight of those rifles, the ridge shielding him. Somehow he managed to stay in the lurching, jerking saddle as the horse slid and plunged crazily. Together they fell the last few feet to solid earth and were still a horse-and-rider unit and right way up.

"Good boy, good fella," Johnny murmured, soothing the scared animal. The rifle shots had stopped and now he was faced with the problem of making the rest of the descent under cover. Somewhere above, the pursuing rustlers were ready with longshooters to pick him off as soon as he showed in the open.

It was a problem, because most of the trail ahead was along open ridgebacks. Johnny had left that trail, and now he would have to make his own, keeping to cover. Below there was a valley with its floor covered with timber and no trail through it. That would do for a start, he thought.

The valley took him further away from the trail, but Johnny wasn't worried. So long as he continued south and downhill, he must be going in the right direction. He loped down the bouldered side of the valley and into the virgin forest.

The pines towered high about him and the sunlight was a far-away sprinkle of yellow overhead. He stepped his mount through the shade, the hoofs muffled by the forest carpet thick and damp underfoot.

The valley floor sloped slowly south and an hour later Johnny was through the forest. He climbed the valleyside for half a mile, came out among boulders at the rim, and saw the wild, untrailed hills sprawling away ahead and below.

Now he'd lost the trail well and truly, making his way where only Indians had trod, not so many years earlier. And he'd thrown off the danger of those rifles. Even if the rustlers saw the hoofmarks where he'd driven his mount off that ridge, they would never find him in all this wildness.

Likely they would continue on to Relton and wait for him to show up, he thought. Well, that was something he would have to worry about later. Right now he bent all his energy on finding his way out of this lost territory.

It was slow work. Sometimes he found himself trapped in dead-end canyons and had to retrace his tracks for long distances. Sometimes he found himself blocked by sheer drops of rocky cliff, or by dense tangles of vegetation no horse could push through. At sundown he called it a day.

He ate from his pack, drank and watered the horse at a seepage of water from a canyonside, and rested. He used the saddle as a pillow, lying there to listen to the forest sounds and watch the stars come alive as the night closed in.

He thought of all his problems and he thought of Valerie Dorman. He lost track of time in a half-sleeping, half-wakeful world of dreams—but a sound, a new sound that wasn't of the forest, jerked him back to reality.

He sat up in the dark, listening. There it was again. A sound that was familiar enough to his ears, but which he'd never expected to hear among this wilderness of cliff and canyon.

The sound of cattle! He listened and heard it again and there was no room for doubt. Somewhere, not too far away, cattle were lowing in the night.

The lowing continued, and Johnny Mill gradually established direction. Somewhere on his left hand, he figured. And damned plain. To hear them so plainly, they must be remarkably close, he thought. There was no wind tonight, to carry sound for any distance.

He listened for long minutes and drifted to sleep. When he awoke to the chill freshness of dawn, the lowing was the first thing he heard. He ate breakfast from his pack, found his grazing horse, and saddled up. Then he swung left and stepped the horse carefully toward a wooded ridge maybe half a mile away. There couldn't be any cows this side of the ridge, he thought. But beyond it...?

MINUTES later he was on the wooded ridge—and there were surprises for Johnny Mill. For one thing, there was a wide and grassy coulee spread out below him, on which a few head of beef grazed. For another, the hilly wilderness had come to an end.

He stared at the scene. The coulee was fifty feet below the ridge, spreading wide to a low cliff barrier that walled the far side. Johnny could see over that barrier to the flat grazing range beyond.

And the answer was right there with him, of course. This was the secret hiding place of the rustlers, the place where stolen stock was assembled before being driven across a mountain trail. He studied the layout. His eager gaze was caught by human movement and came to rest on the colorful shirts of two men at the western end of the coulee.

They were maybe three hundred yards away, at Johnny's left. They were squatted at a camp fire. Likely they were cooking breakfast, Johnny thought. The first sun was just slanting into the coulee.

He saw that the men had rifles leaning against nearby rock, then his gaze shifted to an opening beyond, and the start of a trail that snaked out of the coulee. Likely it opened

out on to the cattle country at some unlikely place, Johnny thought. Likely it was the trail by which the stolen stock was brought in. And those two hombres were sentries.

Johnny was curious about the trail. There seemed to be no other way into or out of the coulee. He hauled his mount back into the cover of timber and headed left along the ridge.

Keeping to the cover, he skirted the rim of the coulee and at last came to where the trail snaked away. He swung his mount away parallel to the trail, and when quite sure that he was out of earshot of the two sentries in the coulee, he eased down on to the trail itself.

It was a soft, sandy path, like a channel between rock walls. It curved and zigzagged a lot. Along the muffling sand the horse moved almost without sound. Then Johnny came to a fork in the channel.

It was a natural fork in the natural rock channel. Johnny thought of how it must have been a river at one time, until perhaps a great storm or a landslide in the mountains had blocked off the water and left it a dry, sandy channel.

One fork swung right toward the mountains, the other left to the cattle country. And along the sand of both trails there were hoofmarks of cattle. And again Johnny Mill had the answer.

He'd been right. There was only one way into and out of the coulee. The cattle were driven in along the lower branch of the trail, and out again along the higher. The higher one had been the one along which Johnny and Steener had seen steers being driven two days ago. Likely there was a secret way over the mountains to some far-off railhead town where the stock was taken and sold. But Johnny's main interest was to find where the lower trail began, to find out where it left the grazing range for the coulee, and to remember it.

He jogged his mount forward once more, along the left fork. It curved deeply between rock walls, where the morning sun hadn't yet penetrated.

There was a danged lot of trail. Each time Johnny rounded a bend he hoped to see an opening ahead, but it didn't happen until twenty minutes later. He saw the opening then, though at first glance it looked like a dead-end. Just a wall of rock blocking the way.

But Mill knew that it couldn't be. The hoofmarks of cattle still showed in the sand, and cattle couldn't pass through solid rock. It was the opening, all right, but hidden by a cliff just a few feet beyond. That was the answer.

The cattle range ended kind of suddenly out there, with broken cliffs rising sheer from the ground. The cliffs lay between the plains and the foothills of the mountains. And one of those cliffs shielded the opening to the cattle-trail. Johnny rode close to the blocking wall and saw that he was right...

And he saw something else.

A puff of smoke, floating upward from beyond a boulder ahead. Then another. He reined back, his horse's hoofs muffled by the sand. With a gentle hand he caressed the animal for quietness. And he knew that there was a man beyond that boulder, a man who had to be put out of action before he could be passed. He was smoking.

The third sentry, of course. Johnny chided himself. He should have known that the trail would be guarded at the entrance, not at the exit. Those hombres back in the coulee were off duty. But they would be quickly on duty at sound of a shot, which meant that this man ahead had to be silenced without fuss.

Tensely, Johnny Mill slid from the saddle.

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THE SENTRY'S give-away smoke still floated above the boulder. The boulder was maybe seven feet high but kind of narrow in bulk. Johnny knew he could be round it in three quick steps. He picked up a pebble, stepped close to the boulder, then threw the pebble to rattle against the rock wall at his left.

Then in a flash he made the three quick strides round the boulder to his right, so that as the sentry turned toward the rattling pebble, Johnny was behind him. The Texan's lean left arm whipped round the hombre's throat and locked there, while his right hand clawed hard at the mouth.

The man hardly had time to be surprised. Before he could struggle, Johnny planted a knee in his back and hauled back on the locked throat. The sentry gurgled in pain, and the next moment he was on his back in the sand, and before he could gasp enough breath for a cry, Johnny Mill fell on him and hit him two tight-fisted blows to the jaw.

The man went out like a light, one hand relaxing its grope for his six-gun. But Johnny still worked quickly.

It would have been easy to silence the sentry forever, but Mill wasn't the killing kind. He got rope from his saddlehorn. He tore off the man's neckerchief, stuffed into his mouth and bound the arms behind and tied the legs, and that was that. As he rode on and out of the trail the sentry was squirming about, full of life again and gurgling behind his gag, but Johnny figured he would be a long time getting free to raise the alarm.

As the Texan rode away he kept looking back, fixing the geography of those cliffs in his mind. The entrance to the hidden coulee was something he wanted to remember.

He loped into Relton an hour before noon. As he passed along the crowded streets he felt the tenseness in him, suspicious of every man who glanced at him, watchful for the slightest sign of hostility. Likely the pursuing rustlers were right there in town now, and he wouldn't know them if he saw them. Unless Steener showed up, or Wolf Yates, himself, or perhaps one or two of the others he'd looked at well enough to remember.

But Steener, anyway, had been senseless when the chase began, so likely he didn't take part. And what about Yates? In the cabin, the Texan's shot had dropped him. Was he hit bad? Was he dead?

Johnny Mill saw the office of the marshal and, leaving his mount hitched, approached it. But the door was closed and locked, the office empty. The small residence behind it was locked up also.

He walked a few yards further to a saloon. He bought a drink and questioned the barkeep about Marshal Ames.

"Out ridin'," the man said. "Him an' both deputies. Them danged rustler've been active again an' the ranchers are screamin'. Red's flat out to break up that there wideloopin' gang . . . an' good luck to him."

Johnny Mill was disappointed. He turned his horse into the corral for feed and cleaning, then felt the need for food himself. He found the cafe where he'd eaten with Steener, and had lunch. The pretty black-haired waitress was there, but he couldn't tell whether she remembered him being with Steener. She wasn't much interested in Johnny. Soon he saw why.

All her spare attention was for a handsome young cowpuncher, a yellow-haired youth who sat at a far ta-

ble. Between her journeys to and from the tables she paused to smile and speak with him, and Johnny could see how it was with them. It showed in their eyes as they smiled at each other, a kind of secret knowingness for each other alone.

THE YOUNG cowhand was tall and strongly made, with a determined chin. Johnny Mill wondered if he knew about Cal Steener's pestering attentions to the girl. The girl was the quiet, soft type, and likely she'd told her cowpuncher nothing of Steener. Her kind most always avoided trouble, for themselves and others.

After lunch, Johnny waited about town, but the marshal didn't return. Likely there were others in Relton to whom he could confide the secret of the hidden coulee, but Johnny didn't know who they were. In this place he was a stranger, and didn't know who was to be trusted.

There seemed only one course for him now, and while having a drink at another saloon he asked the way to the Circle D ranch.

"Take the west trail outá town as far's the Hump," the barkeep said. "The Hump's a kinda rocky outcrop risin' straight up outa the plain. Turn north at the Hump an' the Circle D's mebbe four miles further. You after a job, fella?"

Johnny said that he was, and the barkeep gave him some advice.

"You'll get a better job ridin' for one o' the big outfits, like the Long Y or the Diamond JJ. Ol' Jake Dorman's kinda battlin' and I hear he don't pay too regular. Jus' thought I'd tip you, see."

"Thanks," Johnny grinned. "I'll think about it."

But he didn't need to. All he could think about was a beautiful blue-eyed girl, and if he never got paid at all he didn't care.

That night he went quietly to the corral and saddled up. He had a pack-roll filled with provisions, Wolf Yates' Colt still in his holster, and a beltful of forty-five ammunition.

He led the big black from the corral and was about to mount when he glimpsed movement in the shadows along the coral fence. Then there was a glint of starlight on metal, and at that moment Johnny fell flat to the ground while thunder blasted the night.

But Johnny Mill had been alert for just such a moment, and his Colt had come naturally into his hand as he'd fallen. A split second after the bullet had burned the air above his back, he threw a shot at the shadows.

Johnny's horse plunged away a few feet in fright, and in the shadows there was muffled cursing and shuffling. Johnny crashed another shot that way, and there was the sound of a body falling. Men came running from nearby saloons to see what the shooting was about, but Johnny knew that enemies might be among them. He didn't linger. With a few long strides he was at his horse's side and swinging a leg. A moment later he thundered west out of town.

Now he was out on the starlit plain, the sweat running cold on his face as his mount hit the breeze. The sweat was a kind of reaction, Johnny realizing how close he'd come to being blasted. But the bad moments passed, and, pulling up for a moment and hearing no sounds of pursuit, he settled down to resume his journey at a comfortable pace.

HOURS LATER, when he judged the time to be well after midnight and the distance to be maybe forty miles from Relton, he saw the black mass of the Hump looming in the night. There was no mistaking that freak formation of rock that towered from the flat country.

He circled it and rode north. He let the horse walk now. The Circle D

was only four miles further on and he could hardly arrive there in the small hours. He figured to loaf along for a mile or two, take a rest till sun-up, then ride the other two miles to the ranch-house.

But ten minutes later he heard sounds of activity, somewhere close ahead. There was a shallow rise going up to the night skyline, and the sounds came from beyond. Johnny heard the clatter of running hooves, and men whooping, the way punchers whooped when rounding up steers. Johnny got to the top of the rise and reined back to look.

Out there under the stars he saw the bobbing shapes of running steers and the shapes of mounted men who drove them. And almost before he'd fixed the picture in his mind, activity came suddenly from a new direction.

A small bunch of riders came thundering out of the night, from the north, and their arrival was the signal for all hell to break loose. Sixguns roared in the blackness, flashing yellow fire, and the closer men on horseback yelled curses and milled about in confusion.

Then they were shooting back, adding their shots to the din of thundering hoofs, yells, and the rumble of frightened cattle. A moment later the two lots of horsemen were mixing it at close quarters while the bucking, frantic steers turned to stampede. And Johnny Mill saw the bobbing backs looming at him under the stars, and next moment he was riding for his life.

In the dark he hadn't been able to tell how many steers there were, but now he saw the bobbing mass, hopelessly stampeded, running close behind. He was figuring to ease his galloping mount gradually to the left out of the cattle's way—then there was a sickening lurch as hoofs tangled with something underfoot and the big black heaved from under him.

Johnny Mill hurtled through air, hit the ground and rolled, and thought it was the end. He saw the moving mass of cattle bear down on him, then something, hard and moving, hit him on the head and he knew no more.

But it wasn't the end....

There was a grey mistiness in front of his eyes, and the vague babble of voices far away. Johnny Mill blinked away the mistiness and looked in wonder at the strange twilight scene around.

He didn't understand the twilight or the scene, and when he tried to sit up but couldn't, he didn't understand that either.

But little by little it all became clear. Then suddenly it was all too painfully clear, and his heart thumped.

He was lying there on the ground, under a wide-spreading boxwood, lying there helplessly on the ground with his wrists roped tightly behind. It was dawn. In the grey light he saw men standing near. There were four of them, dusty-clothed cowhands. One man looked down at him and drawled, "Wal, he's done woke up at last. Ain't gonna cheat the rope after all, huh?"

"The rope?" Johnny said. He saw it hanging there, tossed over a branch of the boxwood with a running noose at the end. Then he looked at the punchers again and saw the grim purpose in their faces, and after that he looked beyond them to where another boxwood, twenty yards away, already bore grim fruit. Johnny looked at that stretched body still swinging in the breeze, and licked dry lips.

"He ain't lookin' forward to it," a lanky cowhand said. "Wal, if it comes to that, neither am I. But it's gotta be done, so let's get it over."

"WAIT," JOHNNY MILL said. "You're plumb honest cowhands, I reckon. You wouldn't wanta make a mistake, would you?"

"There ain't no mistake," the lanky

man said. "We wanta do it this way. We're kinda sick an' tired of seein' our boss lose his stock. Nate Dorman's a white man an' we aim to help him by makin' an example. . ."

"Sure, sure," Johnny said. "Rustlers should swing, there ain't no doubt. But I'm no rustler. I'm Johnny Mill. . ."

"Like hell you ain't no rustler!" another puncher said. He was short and bowlegged, with a bald head. "You're one o' the bunch we caught cuttin' out part o' the main herd. When we mixed it with your bunch I gun-whipped somebody in the dark. You're the one. That's the mark o' my gun barrel on the side o' your head."

Johnny felt the throb at his head and remembered being knocked cold in the stampede. He said, "Gents, that mark on my head was put there by a steer's horn or hoof. I'm what you might call. . ."

"Shut up," Baldy growled. "Stop playin' for time. Let's hang this whinin' polecat, fellas."

"Wait a minute," Lanky said, and he seemed to be the leader. "Let him have his last words. I guess he's kinda entitled to 'em."

"I'm what you might call the innocent bystander," Johnny said. "I weren't with them rustlers. I jus' kinda happened along. Saw the whole ruckus, then got caught in the way when the cows did a stampede. My hoss fell in the dark, somethin' hit me an' that's all I know. I can't understand why I'm still alive."

"That's somethin' we'll put right, pronto," the bald man said.

"Wait a minute, Will," the lanky man snapped. "It checks with what we found. That dead black hoss was kinda mangled, like he'd been stomped by the cattle."

"Then why weren't this fella mangled likewise?" another puncher wanted to know.

"Mebbe I was throwed to one side," Johnny suggested. "Mebbe only one cow hit me, huh? I'm no rustler, I tell you. I'm Johnny Mill, a cowhand from Texas. . ."

"Then what the hell are you doin' here?" the bald Will said.

After that, the argument went hot and cold and hot again, Johnny talking like he'd never talked before. That was understandable. He'd never had to talk for his life before.

He told about how he'd come looking for a man who'd killed his best friend, of his adventures with Cal Steener and his trip to Saddleback Mountain, of the attempt to shoot him dead in Relton. And he said, "On top of all that, I've got some information that'll be of mighty interest to ranchers. I know where the stolen stock go, and how come they vanish off the range so danged quick. You hang me, that information's gonna die with me. What about that?"

"Why didn't you spill it to the marshal in Relton?" Will asked.

"Couldn't find him," Johnny said. "He's out ridin', searchin' for the rustlers. I figured the next best thing was to go tell the folks who was losin' cattle."

IF THE DECISION had been in the bald Will's hands they might have hanged Johnny anyway. But the lanky one, a man they called Tomo, had the wiser tolerance of a leader. He said, "Boys, there's a chance this hombre's tellin' the truth, an' we don't wanta swing an innocent man, huh? Let's take him to the house to tell Nate what he knows."

A man untied Johnny's hands, so that he could ride. They had taken his Colt, of course. The tall Tomo had it in his belt. They gave Johnny the horse of the hanged rustler, and started away.

As they rode they kept the Texan

surrounded, not trusting him. He didn't blame them. There seemed nothing more to say at the moment and they rode in silence. Johnny Mill spared a few sad thoughts for his dead horse, then swung his mind back to bigger things. This, he thought, was a hell of a way to be introduced to the girl he intended to marry.

When at last they approached the ranch-house he saw her framed in a doorway. She was dressed the way she'd been on the buckboard, without the sombrero. She came out into the first morning sunlight and it brought out that vivid blue of her eyes. Then the riders were close enough so that she saw Johnny Mill's face, and right away she showed that she recognized him.

She showed it with a fleeting shadow of distaste across her smooth, brown face. Then she looked up at the tall Tomo as he swung from the saddle.

"What is it, Tomo?" she said. "More trouble?"

Her voice was rich and low, but there was spirit in it. She was used to trouble and ready for more of it. Tomo said, "Rustlin' trouble. Only this time we broke up the part. The herd ran, but they're still on the range somewhere. There was shootin', but it was kinda dark an' none of us got hit."

"And you caught one of 'em," she said, flicking her glance at Johnny again. "I—I hope Dad makes an example of him."

"Wal, now—we ain't sure about him," Tomo said. "We figured he was one o' the rustlers, but he claims he ain't."

"I suppose he wouldn't be likely to admit it," the girl snapped. "He's one of them, all right. I saw him in Relton, with that fat beast, Cal Steener. They were getting ready to ride together. Everybody knows that Steener is one of the rustlers."

"I've kinda explained that to these fellas," Johnny Mill said quietly. "I'm ready to explain again, to your father . . .and to you, Miss Dorman."

She flicked that look of contempt at him again.

A GREY-HAIRED man of heavy middle age came from an outbuilding as Johnny and the cowboys dismounted. Tomo greeted him as "Boss," and Johnny knew that he was Nate Dorman. He was the honest-looking type of man that comes short and sturdy, strength in his body to match the worry in his face. He listened while Tomo told of last night's attack and Johnny Mill's story, and while the foreman retailed Johnny's claim to know how the rustlers worked, he eyed the Texan keenly. It was like he used his experienced eyes to probe beneath the skin of Johnny Mill, seeking for the man behind the brown, lean exterior.

"Come inside, fella," he said at last. "You can do some talkin' and explainin'. You come, too, Tomo. You other boys get some rest."

Valerie Dorman made herself one of the group in the ranch-house parlor as Johnny repeated the story he'd told Tomo. He sensed the girl's gaze on him a lot, though each time he looked at her she was looking elsewhere.

"What I don't savvy," Nate said, "is why was you headin' for the Circle D anyway? Sure, sure. . .you wanted to get outa town away from them owl-hoots. But why not get the hell away? It's only a lope from town to here. There're other spreads further out, bigger ones where you'll likely get paid regular. Why'd you pick on my outfit?"

Johnny Mill couldn't very well answer that one. He couldn't say that he'd come to court the plumb hostile Valerie Dorman. He said, "I figured to stay somewhere handy when the man I wanta meet, Boyd Harkin,

looked like turnin' up. As for the pay, I ain't particular. I'd sure like to ride for you, Mr. Dorman, an' help you clean up the rustlin' pest once and for all. I think I can do it."

Nate Dorman frowned, looking doubtful. In the silence his daughter met Johnny's gaze at last. Still with the distrust in her voice, she said. "Seems to me you've got to decide one thing, Dad. Is this man figuring to double-cross us somehow? Or is he honestly willing to double-cross his rustler friends in exchange for his life being spared?"

It took a little time for that to soak in, and when it did it burned a bitter smile on Johnny Mill's lips. Softly he said, "Either way, you don't think much o' me, huh, Miss Dorman? I'll sure try to change you opinion, in time. I figure to make you think a heap different about me—a heap different!" Then he turned to the rancher, "What about it, Mr. Dorman? You gonna hang me? Or will you risk bein' murdered in your sleep by gambling on my honesty?"

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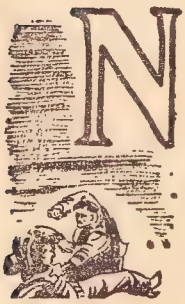

NATE DORMAN was ready to gamble on Johnny Mill's honesty. And it seemed to Johnny that the foreman, Tomo, agreed with the decision. Like his boss, Tomo seemed to have weighed up the Texan and found in him something that appealed to his judgment of men. Johnny sensed it. But Valerie Dorman thought that her father and Tomo were crazy, and Johnny sensed that, too.

The girl shrugged and left the room, and even though he knew she hated him, her departure was like a warmth snatched away. Then Dorman said, "Tell us how that owlhoot gang works, Texan."

"There's a secret coulee at the foot of the mountains," Johnny said eagerly. "I stumbled on it by accident. Its entrance is kinda hid by cliffs, but once you know where it is you'll always find it again. I could lead you there now."

"And that's where the stolen cattle are?" Dorman asked.

"For awhile. They cut out small herds by night an' drive 'em hard, see. Most always they've got 'em into the coulee by sun-up. At the end of a week or more they've got a big herd collected. Then they drive 'em along a dried riverbed, up over the mountains. To some railhead the other side o' the range, I guess. When I went up to the Saddleback with Steener, I saw a herd being drove."

"Then there's only one thing to do," Dorman said briskly. "We'll go to Marshal Ames, tell him the setup, form a posse to assist him, an' raid the coulee. We'll grab the cattle, give 'em back to the rightful owners, then dynamite that coulee so's it can't be used again..."

"Wait a minute," Johnny broke in. "I've got a better idea. Your way, you'd only catch two or three underlings, sentries guardin' the coulee. The leaders, like Wolf Yates—if he's still alive—and his right-hand man, Steener, would still be safe on Saddleback. And you'd have no evidence to connect them with the stolen stock in the coulee. They'd go plumb free."

"Yeh...they sure would," Dorman said. "What d'you suggest?"

"Waal...raid the coulee, sure... but don't dynamite it. And don't take the stolen beef away. Jus' grab the sentries an' bundle 'em away an' kinda put men to take their place."

"I don't savvy," Tomo said. "What's the use of—"

"You ain't heard it all yet," Johnny said. "We leave the coulee an' the cattle like they're still snug an' safe. When the rustlin' gang bring in more beef at night we'll have men waitin' to meet 'em with guns. Maybe there'll be more than one group o' thieves workin'. Mebbe one group'll bring in steers one night, another the next. Anyway, every time they turn up at the coulee, we blast 'em. Comes the end of a week an' mebbe a bunch o' trail-drivers arrive to take the collected herd over the mountains—an' we blast 'em likewise. It's this way, see—anyone ridin' into that coulee must be a rustler, and that's reason enough to arrest 'em for, if they come in force, blast 'em with guns. Comes a day when Yates an' Steener, on their Saddleback, start to wonder where's everybody an' what the hell's goin' on. In the end they, too, venture down to the coulee an' take their medicine."

"Or mebbe they get suspicious that the game's up an' ride like hell across the border," Tomo said.

"Mebbe," Johnny said. "Either way, we'll have busted the rustlin' set-up for good. But I'd sure like to see Yates and Steener get theirs like they deserve, an' I figure they will. That Wolf Yates sits up there on Saddleback an' runs things. But I reckon there're likely men in his gang who don't relish doin' all the dirty work, an' Yates is shrewd enough to worry that they might try to double-cross him, try to cut him out of the set-up and run things for themselves.

"That's why, when it looks like something's gone wrong, Yates will likely gather his own personal sidewinders an' head for the coulee to kinda argue. They'll get within binocular-distance of the coulee, see the stock still there an' two or three guards, everything the way it should be. An' my guess is that they'll ride right into the trap."

Nate Dorman appeared to think that it was a sound idea. They talked about if for an hour, turning over first one aspect then another, ironing out the doubtful points. Johnny said that a small army of riflemen, enough to cope with any bunch of owlhoots, could be secreted in the cliffs and bouldered ridges that circled the coulee.

"An' no matter whether them rustlers come from the mountains or the open range," he said, "they've gotta approach the coulee along walled-in trails where they'll be sittin' shots without cover."

FINALLY the three men agreed that Marshal Ames be acquainted with Johnny's plan as soon as possible. Johnny said that he'd been absent from Relton yesterday, and Dorman said that they might as well wait another day or so, giving the lawman time to get back, so that a hand sent to Relton for the purpose wouldn't have to waste time waiting for him. The Circle D was short-handed anyway, its staff reduced to the few loyal riders who were ready to work on and take a chance about ever getting paid.

Johnny Mill made himself useful about the ranch, spending the day in odd jobs around the corrals and outhouses. The gash at the side of his head wasn't as bad as it had felt, and had now ceased to ache. Several times he felt curious eyes watching him and he didn't blame Dorman and his riders for still harboring suspicions about him.

Johnny realized how it must look, finding him at the scene of the battle with the rustlers in the night. It was a bad introduction to the Circle D and, on top of his true but fantastic story of why he'd been in Relton with

Cal Steener, his explanation of why he'd headed for the Circle D must have sounded weak.

His only way of breaking down the last barriers was by doing his best to make them like him. He judged that it was going to be fairly easy with Dorman and Tomo, a little harder with the bald Will, and danged hard with Valerie Dorman. He longed for a chance to talk with her alone, but for the rest of the day she kept to the house.

At sundown, Will shaded his eyes to the distance as he stood at the bunkhouse door and said, "Here comes young Terry, back at last."

There was a thunder of reckless hoofs and a horse and rider came out of the dust from the east. The cayuse skidded to a pawing halt and Johnny thought that there was something vaguely familiar about the youth who slid from the saddle.

The youth was tall and yellow-haired, and smiling. Nate Dorman and his daughter had come to the ranchhouse door and the boss called, "You been long enough in Relton, Lew Terry. Expected you back yesterday."

Then Johnny Mill remembered the cowboy he'd seen in the cafe, the one who'd been so friendly with the dark-haired waitress, Beth. Lew Terry said, "Boss, the stage got in a day late an' I sure didn't wanta come back without the Circle D mail."

"All right," old Nate said, taking the bundle of letters Lew handed him. "An' why the hell-for-leather pace jus' now, huh? You got bad news or something?"

"No...no..." The young cowhand looked surprised. "Why, was I ridin' fast?"

"Like a bat outa hell," Nate growled, and at his elbow Valerie laughed softly.

"He just feels good, Dad. Lew always feels good when he's been visiting...Relton. Don't you, Lew?"

"Shucks...I guess you're right, Miss Val." Lew was looking very embarrassed, and the other riders whooped with laughter.

In the bunkhouse Tomo introduced Lew Terry to Johnny Mill. The Texan liked Lew and straight away figured him for a handy man in the coming battle with the rustlers.

Tomo told the other riders about the plans and they talked excitedly. They were all enthusiastic about cleaning up the menace, even the suspicious Will showing a glimmer of interest at the prospect. Later, Will headed a trio of riders sent out to do night patrol on the range, and while Lew Terry snored in his bunk, the foreman Tomo handed Johnny his forty-five Colt.

"You'd plumb better have it back," he said, "because a rider without a gun ain't much use in this territory. Anyways, I've kinda got a hunch about you, Mill. I figure you're a straight shooter."

They shook hands on it. And Johnny slept well that night. In the morning the night riders came in for breakfast and reported a quiet night. Tomo, Lew, and Johnny took the day shift, and then the Texan had a first-hand idea of how short-handed Nate Dorman was.

There was a lot of range, too much to be properly patrolled by three riders. It was an explanation of how the rustlers had got away with so much stock. As they rode, Tomo told how the raids had hit Dorman harder and harder so that now he battled for existence. Once the thieving was stopped, he said, Dorman would have a chance to get back on his feet again.

It was a quiet day with no sign of unwelcome trespassers, though at one sandy place near a creek the riders saw tracks of horses. The tracks were maybe a couple of days old and leading south. In the late afternoon they

came across a small herd of Circle D beef in a rocky draw, and Tomo figured that they were the ones that had stampeded two nights ago.

The next day Nate Dorman said, "Wal, mebbe the marshal's back in town by now. He was still away when Lew left, but I guess he wouldn't stay out too many days. Reckon I'll have one o' you fellas ride in an' tell him of Johnny Mill's plan."

"I'll go," Johnny said. "I'm kinda anxious to meet Red Ames. I wanta warn him, too, that Wolf Yates is fixin' to have him killed."

"But ain't it kinda dangerous for you in Relton?" the bald Will asked, suspicion in his squinting eyes as he looked at Johnny. "Ain't them rustlers still waitin' around to plug you?"

"Mebbe," Johnny grinned. He knew that Will was figuring he might be trying for a chance to get back to his friends. He said, "Mebbe they figure I've gone and they've drifted out by now. I thought mebbe I'd be the one to talk with the lawman, seein' that the plan's mine anyway. But it's for Mr. Dorman to say. He's the boss."

"I'll go," Lew Terry said eagerly. "You better send me, boss. I'm good friends with Red Ames."

"Hell's bells!" Dorman said, chuckling. "Ain't you seen enough o' that Harris gal to last you awhile?"

But in the end he decided to send Lew anyway. Partly out of giving the youngster a break, Johnny figured, though the old man claimed it was because he didn't see the sense of Johnny risking a sly bullet in town.

"Tell Ames the plan, see if he agrees, then stay to give him a hand organizin' a posse," he instructed. "This's somethin' all the ranches'll be willin' to lend a hand with. Tell Ames that the D'll provide three or four riders anyway."

"And tell him," Johnny said, "that Wolf Yates was hiring a gunslinger to kill him and the hombre, one Boyd Harkin, is likely here by now." He went on to give Lew a description of Harkin to give to the marshal so that he could be on his guard.

LEW TERRY rode away, his face bright with the anticipation of seeing his girl again. Johnny Mill was put to repairing a corral fence, and during the afternoon Val Dorman came out to saddle her pinto.

Johnny offered to saddle him for her, but she coldly refused his help. The Texan frowned. He was getting nowhere fast.

He said, as she hauled expertly on cinch straps, "You figurin' to ride alone, Miss Val?"

"Of course," she said. "I often ride alone. Not that it's any of your business, Mr. Mill."

"Call me Johnny," he suggested. "An' as for it bein' none of my business—I figure it is. You're my boss's daughter an' lookin' after you—along with lookin' after any of the boss's interests—is my business. An' I figure you're plumb foolish, ridin' alone the way things are."

"Why?" the girl flashed. "The rustlers have stolen plenty of cattle, but they haven't, so far, killed any women. Please don't be ridiculous."

"Wal, now," Johnny said, "I wasn't thinkin' of 'em *killin'* women. I was jus' kinda thinkin' of how they're thieves an' owlhoots with no law or rules except their own."

She stopped buckling for a moment, meeting his gaze frankly. "Are you trying to tell me that I risk being carried off by those owlhoots?" And she laughed.

"What's so funny?" Johnny spoke softly, his eyes meeting hers steadily. "You're a danged attractive gal, Miss Val. If I was an owlhoot, I might..." He smiled slowly, shrugging.

"Oh, might you!" The fire was in

her blue eyes and he wanted badly to kiss her to stifle her words with his mouth on hers. She said, "I pack a .45, Mr. Mill, and I know how to use it. And this pinto of mine is as fast as anything in the West, and I know how to ride him. And anyway, I don't believe that you really think I'm in danger. I figure you're just being fresh, trying to persuade me that I need an escort out there on the range."

"Mebbe you're partly right," Johnny grinned. Then he thought once more of Cal Steener and the way he'd looked at that Beth Harris in the cafe. "But the danger's there, I figure."

"So what?" She shrugged, and turned to her saddling again. "If I do run into danger—what's it to you?"

Before he could answer, she swung to her saddle and loped the brisk-stepping pinto out of the corral. Johnny saw her swing west for the skyline, never once looking back.

He looked at the fence. The repairs were just about finished. He roped a horse and threw a saddle on it. A minute later he was riding fast after the girl. She was out of sight, but he mounted a ridge and looked west and saw her.

HOT ON HER trail he rode, and she heard the thumping hoofs and looked round. She recognized Johnny and didn't run. When he drew up with her she was reined back, flashing her eyes at him.

"What a nerve you've got, Mr. Mill. If you don't stop annoying me I'll..."

"Call me Johnny," the Texan said. "An' I ain't annoyin' you. You asked me a question an' rode away before I could answer. I jus' wanta fix that."

"What question?" she snapped. "I've forgotten what we were talking about anyway."

"We was talkin' of the danger of you ridin' alone, and you plumb wanted to know what it was to me. So I'll tell you, Miss Val." And he told her. "Ever since the day I first set eyes on you I've been in love with you, see. That's straight talk, but you seem to like straight talk. That's the real reason I was headed for the Circle D when I ran into that rustlin' ruckus. Does that make sense to you?"

She didn't answer that one, but Johnny saw her glance at him the way she'd done that first day, from the seat of the buckboard, a sort of quick scanning of his tall, lean strength, a kind of reluctant approval in her eyes.

"That's about all for now," Johnny drawled calmly. "An' if my company still annoys you I'll kinda drop back an' follow you at a distance. Because the danger's there, like I said, and I ain't gonna risk losin' you."

She tossed her bright brown hair, shining under her sombrero.

"Is it possible to lose something you haven't won?" She put a lot of contempt into the question.

"The winning's just a detail that'll be attended to later," Johnny said. "You mightn't like me right now... but I kinda grow on people."

She touched him with a glance again, a glance that was all woman and flushed with spirited challenge. Without a word she kicked the pinto away, and for the rest of the afternoon Johnny Mill followed her from a distance. Never once did she look back, and if he hadn't known better he would have thought she was unaware of him.

JOHNNY MILL did a night ride with Tomo and Will, and they struck no trouble. Nor was there any sign of rustlers the next day. Not that it meant a thing, because in all that range they had to be lucky to meet up with a rustling job. Tomo knew that cows were still being stolen, and

claimed that the next round-up would show a greater loss than ever.

For another twenty-four hours nothing happened, except that Val Dorman carefully avoided Johnny Mill and he hungered for the sight of her. Then in the afternoon Johnny saw a fast-moving cloud of dust made by a single rider approaching the ranch at breakneck speed.

He focused his gaze to the distance and said, "I think it's young Lew. He sure is riding."

"Reckless as hell!" Tomo said. "Rides for the thrill of it."

But when the young cowboy hauled back on the reins at last, skidding his mount in the dust, they saw that his usually smiling face was set in serious, square lines.

Nate Dorman came from the house and to him the puncher reported:

"Boss, Red Ames' goin' ahead with the plan. The posse's gonna meet east o' the Hump, midnight tonight, then ride to the secret coulee an' take over. Then they'll sit tight an' blast everyone that mosey's in. I've promised the marshal four men from the D, like you said."

"Fine," Nate said. "Anythin' else, Lew?" He was searching the young man's serious face, curiosity in his own.

"Only troubles of my own," Lew said. "Boss, I'm goin' back to town. Kinda sorry to leave you at a time like this, but there's somethin' I've gotta do."

"What, for instance?" Dorman said. Johnny and Tomo were listening interestedly and Val had come to the house door. Lew Terry clenched helpless fists.

"I've gotta try an' find Beth Harris. She's plumb disappeared!"

"Disappeared?" Nate Dorman frowned. "You mean she's lit out? Left Relton altogether?"

"Mean what I say," the boy snapped. "She's vanished...like the earth had opened an' swallowed her, mebbe. I've gotta find her. She plumb didn't tell anyone she was goin' away, an' her clothes an' stuff are still in the room over the cafe where she lived. It's a danged mystery."

"Lew, it can't be possible!" It was Val Dorman speaking, her voice incredulous. "A gal can't just vanish. Mebbe she..."

"Mebbe she went ridin' alone," Johnny Mill said, his eyes seeking Val's. She stared at him, her gaze widening.

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LEW TERRY scowled at Johnny and said, "Beth didn't ride. She was from the east aways, never learned to ride—" Then he strode forward, grasping at Johnny's shirt with strong young hands. He said, "You mean somethin'. What is it?"

"Take it easy," Johnny soothed. "Sure, I know somethin' and I'm gonna help you. Let's go into the bunkhouse an' talk about it."

"Talk now, an' fast!" Lew's face was set hard. "What d'you know about Beth Harris?"

"Did she ever mention Carl Steener to you?" Johnny asked.

"No. Why would she? Talk, dang you, Mill, talk!"

"Sure, sure. Mebbe she didn't mention Steener because she knew you'd go gunnin' for him. That Beth's a nice gal, Lew, not the kind to send her man into danger. But Cal Steener...he's jus' an owlhoot animal with no law but his own. He was figurin' to make

Saddleback Mountain a more comfortable place to live in."

"You tryin' to tell that Steener took her?" Lew cried. He let go Johnny's shirt and clutched involuntarily at his forty-five. "I'll kill him! Mill, I'll kill Steener...an' you've plumb gotta lead me up to Saddleback to do it. Pronto!"

"Now wait a minute," Nate Dorman said. "We're all gettin' too excited. The marshal's posse is meetin' tonight an' Mill's gotta lead the way to that coulee, seein' he's the only one knows where it is..."

"The hell with the posse!" Lew cried. "The hell with the coulee! I want Beth back before..."

"Wait a minute!" Tomo took a hand. "By goin' off half-cocked you ain't gonna get your gal back any quicker, Lew. Now jus' you calm down while we figure this thing out. First off, we don't know for sure that she's been kidnapped. Second, how d'you figure you an' Johnny are gonna rescue her from that owlhoot nest on Saddleback? You're gonna need a whole bunch o' men for that. Anyway, how long's Beth Harris been missing?"

"She was servin' in the cafe up till midday," Lew said. "She didn't come back at one o'clock like she should've. They went lookin' for her an' she wasn't in her room. I searched the town before I lit out for here, but Beth ain't in Relton. I'll bet a year's pay she ain't. Yet I was talkin' with her at midday an' she had no thought o' leavin'. Anyway all her stuff's in her room an' some half-done sewin' was scattered on the floor like she'd dropped it there. Sure, I see it now. Beth was took away by force! Like Mill says."

"All right," Tomo said. Then to Johnny, "How long's it take to reach Saddleback, the way you went with Steener?"

"Twelve hours," Johnny said. "There's a trail, an' once you're on it you can't miss." Then he snapped his fingers in sudden excitement and said, "Say, I've just thought of something. It's a danged hard an' dangerous trail, an' nobody would be fool enough to tackle it by night. It'd be sure death in the dark, believe me. See what I mean?"

"Nope. Danged if I do," Tomo said.

Johnny explained quickly.

"If she was carried off after midday there ain't a chance of her kidnappers gettin' her up that trail before dark. 'Specially as they'd have to have her hid in a wagon or somethin', an' travel kinda slow, on account of they couldn't jus' rope her to a hoss or somethin' in daylight an' take her outa town.

"That means," he went on, "that they won't start the climb till tomorrow mornin'. So where do they figure to stop for the night. I'll tell you... at the coulee! At the coulee, which we're fixin' to raid anyway."

There was an interested buzz of talk among the men, and Nate Dorman said, "Johnny, you're plumb right. An' that kinda solves the problem, huh? If the gal has been kidnapped, which we still don't know for sure, she'll be rescued when the posse raids the coulee along around dawn."

THE RIDERS were willing to leave it at that, the group breaking up as men went to clean and check sixguns for the coming action. Nate Dorman and his daughter went back into the ranch-house and Johnny was left alone with Lew Terry. But Lew was far from satisfied with the arrangement. Huskily he spoke to Johnny.

"Damn it, Johnny, this's no good! That's Beth, my gal, back there in them owlhoots' hands. Have a heart,

man! You ain't gonna be satisfied to leave her stay that way till dawn."

"No, no, I ain't satisfied," Johnny said quickly. "If that was Va— If that was my gal there in the coulee I'd be ridin' pronto. An' that's what I'm gonna do. It's sundown now, an' if we ride fast we'll make it in mebbe four hours."

"Johnny!" The young puncher gripped the Texan's shoulder in wordless thanks. Then he said, "D'we tell the others?"

"No," Johnny said. "They'll worry about us bein' back in time for me to lead the posse to the coulee. We'll kinda sneak away an' they can't stop us, huh? The way I figure it, there'll be two or three sentries an' the kidnapper, or mebbe two kidnappers, at the coulee. Takin' 'em by surprise, we can handle 'em. We'll blast 'em from cover o' darkness, if we have to. Let's go, Lew."

The young puncher saddled a fresh horse in a far corral out of sight of the house, and one for Johnny. Johnny strolled away from the house a few minutes later, and soon the two men were riding.

In the thickening dusk they rode hard, really pushing the two strong mounts Lew had chosen. Johnny said, "when they find we've gone, a lot of old suspicions are gonna flare up again, I guess. Will...an' mebbe Miss Val ...are gonna figure I'm runnin' out on leadin' the posse. Or mebbe they'll figure I'm luring you off to my friends the owlhoots. How d'you feel about it, Lew?"

"I feel fine," Lew said at once. "I figured you for a straight shooter from the start, Texan. An' if it turns out I'm wrong...wal, that's a chance I'll take for Beth's sake."

After that they rode in silence, while the first stars flickered in the east. Johnny was taking a direct route to the foothills and the hidden coulee, as near as he could calculate. He figured that four hours of alternate fast riding and easy loping would get them to the coulee.

That was how they travelled, expertly "resting" the mounts with slackened pace between fast bursts. Johnny Mill was planning ahead, figuring to make the return journey just as fast, on a fresh horse of one of the owlhoots at the coulee. Maybe he wouldn't make the Hump by midnight, but he'd risk his neck trying. He didn't want the posse to break up and disperse. The sooner the campaign against the rustlers began, the sooner Johnny would may be get his chance to meet Boyd Harkin. And after that, having proved himself, maybe he could persuade Val Dorman to look on him in a softer light.

NOW THE night was properly down, the open range a dimly lit carpet in the starlight. The black mass of mountains loomed again, seemingly only minutes away. But it was more than two hours before the whitish cliffs of the foothills showed up and Johnny called for a slowing of pace.

They continued to the cliffs at a quiet walk, Johnny remembering the things he'd stowed away in his mind. The day he'd left the coulee sentry bound and gagged, he'd taken particular notice of a lofty, rocky peak that towered from further into the range, but by which it was possible to get a line on the entrance to the coulee.

Johnny saw the peak now, a black tower in the starlight, but it was further to the left than he'd calculated. He swung off in the new direction, Lew Terry following.

"We'll be at the entrance purty soon," the Texan said. "There'll be a guard, an' he'll have to be silenced before he can give the alarm. I'll go

ahead and fix him. When I hoot like an owl, you come on in. Savvy?"

"It's your show," Lew said. "Anythin' you say. All I care about is gettin' to Beth in time..."

"Don't worry," Johnny said, and knew the uselessness of it. He looked at that black peak again and swung his mount closer to the first line of cliffs. Then he reined back, motioning for silence.

He slid from the saddle and whispered, "When I hoot, follow my voice an' bring my hoss along. I'll be as quick's I can."

"Good luck, Texan," Lew said.

Johnny Mill worked his way along the cliff walls, keeping close to them and stepping carefully. At places there was rubble underfoot and he froze at each rolling pebble. But soon he found the place where a split cliff lay behind a solid one, and slowly he approached the opening.

This was it, the entrance trail to the coulee. He scanned the darkness, looking for a sentry. For a long time he saw nothing, and hesitated to turn into the trail proper, for fear of showing himself against the starlit plains behind. Then he heard a soft footfall, then another, and he drew back flat against the cliff and waited.

The footsteps continued, slow and easy, like somebody keeping a lonely vigil. Then Johnny saw movement and the vague shape of a man who looked first one way then the other, along the split passage between the cliffs.

Johnny became part of the shadowy wall, frozen there. The sentry decided to take a look across the open plain next. He moved toward Johnny. Johnny heard his even fall of breath, his unhurried footsteps in the sand. The hombre suspected nothing.

He was easy. Johnny held his breath as the guard went past, then slid the Colt from his holster and swung it like a club. The guard made a gasping, hissing sound and collapsed in a heap. Johnny had hit hard, because this was a tricky mission and he couldn't take chances.

The man breathed very faintly, and Johnny guessed that he'd be out for a long time. But before he finished examining his victim he heard the swinging footsteps of another hombre coming along the sandy trail behind.

Swiftly Johnny dragged the unconscious sentry to one side of the entrance, where his bulk blended with the shadows. Then Johnny got himself flat against the cliff as the shape of the newcomer came to view, and a voice drawled:

"You there, Happy? It's my turn, an' you can go to your bunk, you lucky jasper... Happy, where are you? It's Jackson."

To think was to act, and Johnny Mill widened his mouth in an artificial yawn to disguise his voice.

"In the bunk's right where I—I sure long to be," he said in that yawning voice. "Thought you'd never—get here..."

The relief sentry strolled right up to him, and then Johnny Mill brought his deadly gunbutt into play, his arm moving with the speed of a striking rattlesnake. Without a sound the man doubled and fell, and Johnny exulted at the lucky way things were going.

It sure was lucky that the relief guard had happened along at that moment. Now there were two of the gang out of action, without fuss or alarm. Johnny put his hands to his lips and hooted softly, like an old Sioux Indian had once taught him.

He repeated the hoot at intervals, guiding Lew Terry. Soon he saw the horse-shapes looming. He met them, and whispered his good news to Lew. Then he said, "Reckon we'll leave the hosses at the entrance and go along the trail on foot. It'll be quieter."

THE SAND along the curving, walled-in trail muffled their footsteps. In the dark it seemed much farther to the fork, but they reached it at last. The walls of the trail were whitish under the stars, and Johnny led the way along the right-hand turn. Long minutes later he heard the snort and stomp of a horse somewhere ahead.

It was a sign that the coulee was near. The horse sound was something Johnny had guarded against by leaving his and Lew's cayuse back at the entrance. A horse sure could give you away when you were gambling with your life. Now the two men rounded a curve, and the first thing they saw was the flicker of a camp fire.

Two men squatted in the firelight, talking in low tones. The fire was on the coulee near the end of the trail, where on Johnny's last visit a couple of owlhoots had been cooking breakfast. Johnny recalled that there had been three sentries stationed here then, and likely there were three now. He'd already accounted for two of them. Likely a fourth man was Beth Harris's kidnapper, Johnny thought.

He could see no sign of the girl. Then he reasoned: If she's here and out of sight, there could be another kidnapper, or even more, yet not in view. I'll have to go carefully.

"Beth—where's Beth?" Lew was whispering urgently, and Johnny signalled him to silence. It was in his mind that Beth might not be here at all, that he and Lew had acted on sheer theory. But he didn't say anything. The first problem was the defeat of those enemies at the fireside, and this was a job where you could only worry about one thing at a time.

The fire was only twenty yards away and one of the men kept glancing toward the trail opening, where Johnny and Lew lurked. Suddenly Johnny realized why. He was expecting the relieved sentry, the man called Happy, and was wondering why he didn't come.

"What now?" Lew breathed.

The slight crackle of the fire made whispering safe, and Johnny said, "Purty soon one of 'em is gonna come this way. I know it. We'll deal with him quick an' quiet. There might be others here, men we haven't seen yet."

Almost before he'd finished, one owlhoot rumbled a throaty curse and said something about "Happy." He got up from the fire, picked up a rifle and came lumbering toward the trail. Johnny and Lew drew back in the shadows. Johnny had his Colt in hand, holding it by the barrel.

IT WAS LIKE before, the man drawing level, the gunbutt cracking down with cruel finality—only this time the fall was heavy and scuffling, so that the fourth hombre looked up from his fireside and snapped, "What's that? What happened?"

Again, to think was to act. Johnny reversed the grip on his gun and sauntered toward the fire.

"The damned dark!" he complained, as if he'd stumbled. He saw the man at the fireside relax a little, though he still peered warily at Johnny's approaching shape.

The owlhoot called softly. "Who's that. Are you Happy?"

"I ain't downright sad," Johnny said, and then he was close enough so that the owlhoot saw his face in the flickering light. The man clawed at a gun in his belt but didn't have a chance. Johnny smashed a shot into him and he sprawled back in a doubled heap, groaned once, and lay still.

Johnny stayed there at the edge of the firelight, listening for sounds of alarm caused by the shot. There were none. Lew Terry came to his side. Neither man spoke for a full minute.

Johnny said, "Likely that's the lot. I reckon..."

"Wait—what's that sound?" Lew said, clutching his arm.

Johnny heard it, too. A rustling sound, not too far off, somewhere to the right of the fire where the coulee wall loomed blackly. Then there was an appealing, frantic gurgle of distress that could only mean one thing, and Lew said hoarsely, "Beth!"

He dashed toward the coulee side and Johnny followed. Lew was intent on finding his girl, but Johnny was still watchful for further hostility. He followed the stumbling, groping Lew in the darkness and at last saw the cowboy drop low. He went close to Lew and saw the muffled shape at the base of a tree, and slim legs white in the night.

Still he guarded against more hostility while Lew fumbled with the knots of gag and binding ropes. Then Lew took his precious bundle in his arms and walked back to the fire. Johnny let him go. He stayed there in the dark, listening and planning further action while Lew and his clinging burden said soft and gentle things to each other at the fireside.

Johnny gave them a few minutes then went to them. Lew turned and said, "Johnny, it's all right. There were only four hombres here. Beth was kidnapped by two fellas an' brought here in a wagon, but the wagon an' driver went back to Relton."

"You all right, Miss Beth?" Johnny asked, peering at her.

"Yes, thank you. They were rough, but they didn't touch me. They were taking me to...to that horrible Steener—"

The girl stopped with a little gasp, looking closely at Johnny, and the Texan knew that she'd recognized him.

"Sure, sure. I'm the fella you saw with Steener in the cafe, Miss Beth. But it's all right. I ain't an outlaw. Lew'll explain later. Right now we've got things to do an' no time to waste. First, Lew, we've gotta collect the bodies."

"Why?" the puncher asked.

"For several reasons. I'll tell you while we work. I guess Miss Beth'll be all right for a few minutes, huh?"

He dragged the dead man from the fireside and left him among boulders near the coulee wall. Then he and Lew left to get the unconscious men, while the girl waited at the fireside.

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IT TOOK a long time to get the three unconscious men away from the entrance trail, bound and gagged, and hidden among boulders. It was time that could ill be afforded, but it was mighty necessary. When it was done at last, Johnny Mill said, "Now we've gotta decide something."

"What?" Lew asked.

"Which of us is gonna go back to join the posse, an' which of us is gonna stay here," Johnny said.

"Why can't we both go back?" the puncher asked.

"An' leave this place deserted? No, Lew. This's where rustled stock is brought, mostly at night, an' if a herd is brought in while there's no one here the rustlers are gonna know that something's wrong. Likely they'll light out an' spread the alarm, and that'll spoil the whole game."

"Mebbe, Johnny. But what can we do?"

"One of us can wait here while the other leads in the posse. If a herd does arrive, it'll likely only be drove by three or four men. But those men, all of 'em, have gotta be killed. I fig-

ure it can be done, takin' 'em by surprise as they enter the trail, by blastin' at 'em from the dark. I'll wait here an' try, anyway. You take your gal across your saddle—she won't be much extra weight—and drop her at the ranch. Then join the posse at the Hump an' lead 'em back here quick's you can. D'you figure you can do it?"

"Sure, I can do it, Texan, but I sure hate to leave you here alone. I mean..."

"I'll be fine an' dandy," Johnny assured him. "If rustlers come they'll be lambs comin' to the slaughter. That's why I wanted them bodies outa sight. I don't want anythin' to spoil the surprise I'm plannin' for new arrivals."

"All right, you're the boss," Lew said. "I'll catch me a fresh hoss an' get goin'. I'll be back with the posse soon's I can make it. Good luck, Johnny...an' thanks for what you've done already."

Five minutes later Lew and the girl rode away, and Johnny was left in a silence that was broken only by the crackle of the fire and occasional sounds of cattle in the coulee.

THE TEXAN lost no time. First he built up the fire to a healthy brightness, feeding it with wood gathered from brush near the coulee walls. Then he had an idea. He went back to the boulders, found the dead outlaw and dragged him back to the fireside. He propped him in a squatting position at the fire, so that anyone from the mountain trail, looking the scene over at a distance, would assume that all was normal.

Then Johnny Mill went back along the entrance trail, turned left at the fork and climbed the difficult trail walls to a point overlooking the split cliff. Down there was where he'd attacked the first sentry, where if anyone arrived with steers they must enter. And from here, too, he had a good view across the starlit cattle country.

Johnny rolled a smoke, keeping it cupped with a hand, and waited. When he became used to the night he realized that the help of starglow was a very real thing, and his view across the plains extended to fantastic distances.

He knew that approaching cattle and riders would make a moving mass that would be seen in plenty of time, and now while he scanned the night there was room in his mind for thinking.

He thought of Wolf Yates, still wondering whether his hurried shot in the cabin had killed the outlaw chief. If Yates was dead, who had taken over? Cal Steener? Likely, he figured.

He thought of Boyd Harkin, who had cunningly pulled a gunfight quarrel against Johnny's best friend back in Texas. It had been a planned thing, with the object of making Johnny's friend pull a gun on a man against whom he had no chance, and then Boyd Harkin had lit out to escape the wrath of the dead man's friends. But Johnny Mill had been one friend who'd vowed that Harkin would never escape, and the subsequent search for Harkin had finally brought him to this adventure in Arizona.

Now he wondered about Harkin. Had he joined Yates' owlhoot gang by now? Johnny hoped so. He hoped that Harkin would be included in this grand clean-up. Because then there would be no worries left in Johnny's mind, and he would be free to set about winning the lovely Val Dorman for his own.

And he thought of her, long and longingly.

Then there was movement out there in the night and the dreams fell away from his brain, and Johnny Mill tensed with the sharp realization that there were things to be done, a lot of dangerous action to be weathered before the dreams could come true.

HE SAW A small black mass of movement out there on the plain. It was moving toward the hidden opening to the trail below.

Soon he heard the drum of walking hoofs, but not many. The moving mass was too small and the hoof-sounds too few for even a small bunch of steers. Johnny Mill knew that they were riders out there, two or three horsemen approaching the coulee. Then across the lessening distance he heard voices.

Too far off for the words to come clearly yet. But near enough for Johnny to sense the tenseness of the conversation. Then as the black shape moved closer to split into separate shapes of three horses and riders, Johnny did catch snatches of the talk.

He heard...“somethin' on, all right ...danged lawman ain't gettin' up such a big posse for nothin'...sooner we warn Steener the better....”

Then there were more words, like, “too good to last, anyway...an' we've been damned lucky...me, I ain't anxious to go on workin' for Steener ...he ain't got Wolf's brains...land us in trouble, sure....”

Johnny, high on his cliff, thrilled to the knowledge that his desperate shot up in the cabin had actually killed Wolf Yates. And he thrilled to the thought that the owlhoots had got wind of the marshal's posse and were out to warn Steener. And he guessed their reason for heading to the coulee.

They couldn't attempt to climb the mountain trail to Saddleback in the night, and with the marshal plenty active on the plains they saw no use in being active themselves. They weren't aiming to be caught rustling and hung from the nearest tree.

But they never once guessed that the hidden coulee was a secret no longer, and they figured that it was the safest place for them to be tonight. Johnny got it all straight in his mind and by that time the three riders were at the entrance.

There they hesitated, while the leading hombre called in the darkness. Johnny heard him curse, and say something about the danged sentry being asleep somewhere among the rocks. Then the three riders continued along the sandy bed of the trail.

But down there between the walls they were just vague shapes in the gloom, and Johnny couldn't risk action until he could be certain of quick results. So carefully he began to follow the three, working his way along the top of the winding cliffs as the riders moved below.

Some of the going was rough and the Texan fell behind. He hurried to catch up, but quietness came first and by the time they'd turned in at the coulee he was twenty yards from the entrance. But as he scrambled along the cliff top in the dark he heard the curses and words of the men as they dismounted near the fire.

“Damn it....Chalker's asleep, too ...everyone's asleep round here. They wouldn't have dared while Wolf was alive, huh? Chalker wake up, damn you!”

Now Johnny was almost above the entrance to the coulee, while across and below the three men made excellent targets in the glow of the fire. He saw a man move to shake the sitting Chalker by the shoulder, and Johnny's Colt came to hand for quick action.

Chalker flopped sideways, white face turning toward the fire, and the man who'd shook him stood up and spat an oath.

“He's dead! Chalker's dead! What the hell....”

JOHNNY'S Colt crashed and the bullet cut off the man's voice. Johnny swiftly, yet calmly, arced his gun, still pulling the trigger. He stood there in

the dark at the top of his cliff and dealt out hot lead, while the three men died in the firelight.

The third took two bullets, trying to dive for darkness with a broken arm, but Johnny made mighty sure of the second shot low in the chest. Then it was all quiet down there, with bodies sprawled in the flickering light and the shapes of quivering horses beyond.

Johnny Mill scrambled down from the wall, sweating. He watched the bodies, warily, his gun at the ready until he'd finished looking each man over. They were all as dead as they'd ever be. Then he sheathed his gun and began hauling them out of sight.

All except two. He propped up Chalker again, and one of the others, in realistic attitudes near the fire. He stirred the fire to fresh life and made his way back down the trail to the entrance. He was about to climb for the cliff top once more when a voice close by said, "Hold it, fella. One move an' you're dead. . . "

But Johnny moved anyway. It was an occasion when you either moved with unexpected suddenness or didn't dare move at all. Johnny crashed his weight at the position of the voice and as his body collided with another there was a flashing crash of thunder right in his face.

But the bullet's hot breath fanned his cheek, and next moment he was rolling on the ground, locked with a powerful enemy and fighting for his life.

He felt the hard metal of a gun in the man's hand, and tried desperately to stop it from coming to bear. But he couldn't get a proper grip of the wrist and thought his only chance was to keep rolling. He had a leg and one arm locked about the guy's long body, and rolled about violently to baulk all attempts at a second shot.

The rolling movement came to an end as the two men crashed into the cliff wall. But the enemy took most of the force and the impact knocked the gun from his hand.

Then he squirmed out from under and got his hands to Johnny's throat. The hands were like steel claws. They dug at the flesh and closed Johnny's windpipe, while Johnny clawed at the Colt in his holster.

His own weight was on the holster and the gun wouldn't come free. But he had his right hand gripping the butt, and kept it there. As he spluttered and choked and fought the dizziness in his brain, he crashed the point of his left elbow at the vague face that loomed over him.

There was a gasp and a slight relaxing of the grip on his throat. In that moment he shifted his body a little and the Colt came free. As the clawlike hands settled back to strangle him, tighter and more merciless than ever, he used his last sense and strength to dig the Colt deep into heaving muscles and pull the trigger. There was a muffled report, and a great spitting curse, and then the air gurgled sweetly back into Johnny's lungs and his enemy fell sideways.

JOHNNY MILL took time out to recover, then bent over th huddled body to find no sign of life. There was a sound behind him, at the opening to the trail, and he spun ready for more action. But it was a horse standing there.

The dead man's horse, Johnny thought. *The hombre arrived while I was shootin' those owlhoots back at the fire. He heard the shots an' waited here. Then I came back an' he was gonna find out who I was before actin' one way or the other. I was caught napping,* Johnny thought, *an' I'm danged lucky to've got out of it.*

He bundled the dead man into shadow near a cliff wall, and then slapped the cayuse away across the plain.

Wearily he climbed his cliff again, to watch for more arrivals.

It was a long and lonely wait. Johnny had no watch and lost all track of time. He figured out how long it would take Lew Terry to drop Beth at the Circle D, hit the breeze for the Hump, and get back here with the marshal's posse. A good six or seven hours, he decided. Likely it would be dawn before they arrived.

But he tried to estimate how much time had passed already, allowing so long for his first wait at the cliff top, so long for his shooting and hiding of the rustlers, so long for his fight at the entrance. It was a hopeless task and only left him confused.

He thought the night would never end. He almost would have welcomed more action to break the monotony. But no more action came. He caught himself dozing, and struggled out of it to see a grey tint in the eastern sky. It was dawn. At last.

But dawn brightened to daylight, and there was no sign of the posse.

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THE SUN climbed high enough to angle its rays into the coulee before the marshal's posse arrived at last. Johnny Mill greeted them at the entrance, and noted that they looked weary and rather the worse for wear. There were about thirty men, very tired in the saddle, and the tall Tomo with blood soaking one torn sleeve.

Johnny saw the lawman, too, tall and stern like he'd impressed the Texan in the cafe at Relton. Tomo introduced him to Johnny, and told him what had happened. There'd been a big ruckus out there on the range.

Lew Terry had reached the posse at the Hump about an hour after midnight and they had started for the coulee. But they'd run bang into a big rustling job.

"There was mebbe twenty men, cuttin' out a big herd o' cattle from Circle D range," Tomo said. "They had scouts watchin' for trouble, an' we ran into hot lead. Then we kinda shot it out with the bunch. It was plenty fast an' furious in the dark. We killed mebbe half the owlhoots an' lost six men ourselves. The rest o' the gang lit out to the south. We kinda had the north blocked off an' that was the only way they could run."

"But they'll be makin' back for here soon's they can," Johnny said. "You can bet on it. They must've meant to be plenty active last night. A small group got word o' the posse, somehow, an' ran here for safety. I had my hands full for a while." He told of his adventures.

"Best thing we can do is get outa sight into the coulee an' nab 'em when they come," Red Ames said. "This whole plan's a danged good idea. Mill. Reckon this'll clean up the Jonson gang for good, huh?"

They crowded into the coulee. Then the marshal stationed men along the tops of the trail walls to deal with the rustlers as they arrived. Johnny showed him the bodies, and told of the snatches of talk which seemed to indicate Wolf Yates was dead and Steener in charge.

Wounded men, Tomo among them, took the opportunity to clean up their hurts. Others roamed about the coulee, looking at the beef collected there, one man remarking that there was about every brand he'd ever heard of.

The remnants of the beaten rustlers turned up just before noon. There was a short but violent battle in the walled trail, the shots bringing men running from the coulee with drawn guns. But

the battle was over before they reached it.

The deputies along the cliff tops had had all the advantage and eleven rustlers lay dead along the trail. Marshal Ames was pleased. This, added to last night's toll of battle, had wiped out a large part of the gang already. It was a much quicker result that anyone had hoped for. The marshal relieved the cliff top guards with fresh men, and settled down to wait for more rustlers to arrive.

BUT THE day passed without further incident, the time dragging for Johnny Mill. The only happening of note was when the short, bald puncher named Will came to Johnny and asked for a handshake.

"I had you all wrong, Mill," he said. "I'm doggoned ashamed. Now I wanta be your friend."

"That suits me fine," Johnny said. Then, "That leaves jus' one more person to win over—"

"She won't be so hard," Will said surprisingly. "I seen her lookin' at you a lot, an' I reckon I know somethin' about women."

He grinned and walked away, Johnny staring in surprise after him.

He enjoyed his rest that night, sleeping from sundown till daylight. During the night another small bunch of riders had come to the coulee and been blasted, he was told.

"It can't leave many more," Tomo said. "Unless mebbe the rest get kinda suspicious about their friends headin' for the coulee an' vanishin'. Then they'll light out, I reckon."

"Mebbe," Johnny said. "But I sure know one hombre who'll be along purty soon. His name's Cal Steener, an' he's up there on Saddleback an' can't possibly know that there's anythin' wrong. That thick-necked coyote's waitin' for a gal, a gal he's so crazy for that he sent a man to kidnap her. The gal was to be took up to Saddleback yesterday, see. She didn't arrive. She won't come today, either, an' Steener'll be gettin' impatient. And mebbe suspicious. Not many men'll trust a beautiful gal in other men's hands. Yes, Tomo, I got a feelin' that today or tomorrow Steener's gonna come down the mountain lookin' for Beth Harris."

But neither Steener nor anyone else arrived at the coulee that day or the following night, and Steener, if he was getting impatient up there on his mountain, wasn't the only one.

Johnny Mill was impatient for action. He didn't want this thing to drag on and on. He wanted it cleaned up and done with. Early the next morning he saddled a horse, swung to the saddle, and rode casually out of the coulee before his sleeping comrades were aware of his intention.

The guards along the cliff top watched him go, but it was none of their business. They were interested only in hombres coming in, not going out. Johnny reached the fork and swung north along the climbing trail. This was the way the stolen beef were taken up and over the mountain, and he had a hunch that if Steener happened to be on his way down from Saddleback he would use this trail. So that it seemed to Johnny there was no chance of missing Steener.

The new outlaw leader wasn't the only thing on Johnny's mind, of course. Never for a minute had he stopped thinking of Boyd Harkin. If the gunslinger had really been going to join the gang, it wasn't likely that Wolf Yates' death had changed things. The special enemies—like Red Ames—who had threatened Yates now threatened Steener, and Boyd Harkin was hired to take care of them. Was he up the mountain now? Had he not arrived yet? Or had he arrived, got his instructions to kill Ames, and gone to Relton looking for the lawman? They were

questions which Johnny would have given a lot to be able to answer.

This cattle trail was easier than the one by which Johnny and Steener had climbed from Relton, and the Texan was making good time. But the distance was longer, he guessed, and likely it would be after dark before he made Saddleback.

That was all right with Johnny. That was fine. He didn't know how many enemies he'd be running into on Saddleback, and an outnumbered man always had a better chance in the dark.

Then, a little after midday, he forgot his vague worries about Saddleback. For this was it, the thing he'd half expected. He topped a rise in the trail and looked down to see the way it took a temporary dip and curved in a wide half-circle—and on the lower level of the circle there was a horse and rider.

THE MAN was climbing temporarily, but coming downtrail. And the thick figure with its huge arms and shoulders bulging the shirt was easy to recognize. It was Cal Steener, and he was headed for the coulee, wondering about the kidnapped gal who'd failed to arrive, like Johnny had figured he would.

He was headed for where Johnny waited, yet because of the dipping curve in the trail, his back was to the Texan. Johnny watched. The squat bandit kept looking back over his shoulder along that trail, and once he reined back as if to listen. Johnny thought maybe he sensed that he was being watched. The Texan drew his mount out of sight off the trail, in case Steener might lift his gaze and see him.

Soon Johnny headed further among boulders as he listened to the climbing hoofs of Steener's mount. It seemed a long time, waiting for a sight of the man and the resulting action. He eased the Colt in his holster, grinning at a memory. He was remembering Steener saying, *"I ain't made for fast movin' . . . you only gotta look at me to know I ain't fast. . . ."*

He saw the shadow of Steener's horse out there on the trail, then the shadow of Steener himself, drawing level with Johnny's position behind the boulder clump. The horse and rider were in sight, and action blasted even before Johnny was ready. Some curious sense of fear made Steener look straight at Johnny Mill as he passed the boulders—and in a flash his gun was out of its holster and spitting bullets.

Quick thinking was the only thing that saved the Texan. In the tiny instant of time when he remembered the sly smile of Steener, as he'd claimed to be slow, in that fleeting moment when he realized that the bandit was really fast and he couldn't match Steener's draw, Johnny did the next best thing and raked his mount's belly with spurred heels. The animal plunged violently as Steener's bullets fanned Johnny's swaying body and his Colt came out.

And once he had a gun drawn, Johnny Mill was a match for any man. His first snappy throw from the back of the plunging horse caught Steener in the shoulder. Two more shots followed in almost one continuous roar. One smashed Steener's wrist and the next bored through his neck at the side. The heavy man fell and lay still on the trail before Johnny had quietened his startled mount.

And that was that. The Texan left his saddle to make sure the owlhoot was dead. There was no doubt. He was probing the body with booted foot when a shot crashed and a bullet whined close to his head. It shocked Johnny to action again, and he dropped

flat on the trail as another shot echoed its crash in the mountains.

Two more shots crashed, the bullets thudding into flesh. Into the dead Steener's flesh. Johnny Mill had dropped flat behind the bulky body for shelter. Somebody was shooting from a short way uptrail, where it curved from the temporary dip.

And while he lay there, gun in hand, the Texan cursed his own carelessness. He should have been ready for this. He should have guessed that Steener's reason for looking behind so often had been that a companion had fallen behind for some reason and was expected to draw level again.

But it was too late for such realizations now. Steener's companion had been hurrying to catch up when the shooting had burst forth. He'd drawn rein, seen Steener go down and Johnny come on to the trail to look at him. And taken a long shot at him. Johnny could tell by the whine of the bullets that they'd been shot from close to the limit of six-gun range.

HE HEARD a horse scrabbling on the loose earth of the trail. For a moment he thought the newcomer was approaching. But the hombre seemed to realize that Johnny's gun would be out and ready, and it looked as if he wasn't hankering for a two-way ruckus at close range. Johnny, flat behind Steener's body, heard rubble rolling noisily from the scrabbling hoofs, and knew that the horse was off the trail and climbing a rough slope. He chanced a look then.

He saw the cayuse's hindquarters disappearing round rocky outcrops a few feet up the slope off the trail. He scanned a line of broken slope and figured where the rider would come to view again. At a point above, on his left, he decided.

He got up and scrambled off the trail, making for that point. He got there quickly. It was a leaning block of sandstone and he expected the enemy to round it. Already he could hear the horse approaching, hoofs scuffling awkwardly on loose rubble.

Johnny's Colt was half-empty but there was no time to reload. He tried to think of how many bullets he'd fired at Steener. Three or four. Three, he thought.

That would leave three live shells in the gun, and he hoped it would be enough. Likely if he couldn't finish this hombre with three shots he would be dead himself by then. The stumbling hoofs came closer, and Johnny tensed. He raised his gun arm.

The horse's bobbing head came in view round the corner of rock, so close that he could have touched it. He was waiting to fire point blank at the rider. The saddlehorn came to sight, then the rest of the saddle—Johnny's finger was quivering on the trigger before he realized that there was no rider.

Then there was a laugh from behind and above, and a shadow brushed the earth in front of Johnny. A shot thundered and there was a hot stab of pain at his shoulder as he whirled and fired upward with incredible speed. His shot cut the laugh to a swearing stop and he had a glimpse of a man staggering back out of sight. Then he heard the fall of a body.

The burning pain high in his shoulder sent a wave of sickness through the Texan. But he fought it off stubbornly. The hombre had tricked him neatly, but Johnny's fast shot had found a target. Was the guy dead, though? He had to find out.

He found a way up the leaning sandstone and reached the top to see a man sprawled away from him, his boots nearest the edge. The Texan saw that the hombre was clapping a hand to his left upper arm, but there was no gun in either hand. His holster was

empty. He must have lost his gun when he'd fallen, Johnny reasoned.

He scrambled over the edge of the rock to gain the hombre's level. Then, before he'd got proper balance, the man moved with the speed of a rattler. His boot caught Johnny high on the chest and he stumbled, dropping his Colt. He heard the Colt clattering on rock far below, then turned to be on guard against this enemy who still had plenty of life in him.

The hombre had scrambled quickly to his feet—and for the first time Johnny Mill saw his face.

IT WAS THE face of a killer, expressionless except where the cheeks were drawn in pain, the eyes colorless. It was the face Johnny had dreamed about for so long, the face of gunslinger Boyd Harkin who'd killed Johnny Mill's friend.

"I'm glad..." Johnny panted. "I'm glad it's you. I'm gonna kill you."

"What with?" Harkin sneered. "You ain't got a gun."

"Neither have you," Johnny said tightly. "I reckon you'll miss yours more 'an I'll miss mine. I'll take a chance on my bare hands."

He closed with the killer. It was a strange battle. Two unarmed men, one with blood seeping from a shoulder, the other with his left upper arm shattered. A one-handed fight. But Johnny made his one hand a good weapon, bunching the fist and crashing it at Harkin's face.

Harkin tried to fight but he was the first to fall back. Then suddenly he brought his right foot into play again, kicking high and viciously. The boot sunk deep into Johnny's middle and he took the shock of it as, with a swift hand, he grasped the ankle. Then with a savage twist he threw Harkin off-balance and leaped to follow up the advantage.

Then he jerked to a stop. Harkin had staggered away, drunkenly waving one good arm to regain balance—and there he was teetering on the edge of that sandstone block. Then the edge crumbled under his boots and with a cry he disappeared from view. Johnny heard a sound like a smashing melon, and when he staggered to the edge he saw Harkin fifteen feet below, the rock beneath his still head pooling with life-blood....

Four months later there was a wedding at the Circle D ranch. All the hands got drunk and everybody had a wonderful time. And when Johnny and Val found themselves in sweet isolation at last, the girl sighed and said gently, "I did it....I did it...."

Johnny wanted to know what, and she told him.

"That very first day I saw you on the street of Relton," she said, "I decided that I'd marry you. Of course, I had some bad moments when I thought you were a rustler. But it's how it turns out that matters, huh?"

"You said it," Johnny grinned.

A Thrilling Feature Novel

SIX-GUN SAWBONES

by Norman Barlow

leads off the February issue of

DOUBLE ACTION WESTERN

The question was: if William Shore had been involved in a conspiracy to rob the stage coach — a robbery which resulted in murder — and had renounced the role, had he nonetheless changed his mind too late?

POINT OF NO RETURN

Judge Steele story

by Lon Williams

WHEN HARD-BRAINED rascals figured they could make money without working for it, by thunder, they then and there became candidates for hangropes. Just now, Judge Wardlow Steele was reluctant host to one of them. This one sat on a bench in Flat Creek's criminal court and nervously awaited proceedings which would decide his fate. He was young, dark-haired, and good-looking; but Steele eyed him fiercely and without sympathy. Court had been called. Clerk James Skiffington had screeched in his customary loud voice, "People *versus* William D. Shore, alias Golden Shore, alias Bright-and-eternal Shore. Charge, first-degree murder."

Despite Shore's youth and good looks, Steele put anger and vengeance into his words. "Murder, eh? Be-consarned if you didn't start mighty young. When a half-ripe baboon commits murder around hyar, it's either because he thinks he's too smart to get caught or because he's too mean to give a whittle-stick. Whar's your lawyer?"

A thin-faced, black-haired, elegantly-dressed, tall gentleman in dark suit, white vest and four-in-hand necktie got up and said impassively, "I am his lawyer, if your honor please. French Demeree."

"Yeah," Steele grouched. "Demeree from Tennessee. It's been so long since you showed up in this court I'd begun to hope you'd gone back whar you

come from or reverted to your true nature and got yourself hung. Since you come West for health and fortune, what's keeping you hyar now?"

"If your honor please," Demeree replied with quiet dignity, "Scripture has it that a prophet is oft-times more honored in distant lands than in his home country. Moreover, being an artist of sorts, I thrive best here where my art is appreciated. And, may it please your honor, there is still another compensating factor for choice of this rugged frontier as my domicile. A lawyer's mission, like that of a physician, is to save life, not to destroy it. If I can look back at sunset and know that here I have been instrumental in saving one innocent man from an unjust hanging, my fellow-men can say of me that I was handed down to eternal rest in peace with my soul. To add another thought. . . ."

"That's enough, by thunder. If anybody ever asks me what it takes to make a lawyer, I'll tell him that fust and foremost it takes an oily tongue." He swung left. "Whar's our man?"

A sturdy, handsome redhead got up with a displeased expression. "Wade Claybrook, your honor. Prosecuting attorney."

Steele lifted his shaggy eyebrows. "What! Don't you want to make a speech, too?"

"If your honor please," Claybrook responded dryly, "I think we should proceed to business. A defendant is detained here to be tried for murder."

Steele was disappointed. Notwithstanding outward expressions of distaste for flowery words, he secretly

enjoyed these brief exhibitions of eloquence. He had often wished in vain that he had been so gifted himself.

He looked down at defendant Shore. "All right, you bright and shining mirage, what's your plea?"

Demeree had remained standing. "Defendant pleads not guilty, your honor."

Steele repressed his usual sarcastic impulse. "Panel a jury, Bucky."

WITHIN a short time big Sheriff Jerd Buckalew had a jury impaneled. Witnesses were then sworn and escorted to a back room.

"Wade, call your fust witness."

Claybrook got up again. "If I may do so, your honor, I should like to state briefly our charges against this defendant."

"Proceed."

"This indictment," said Claybrook indicating a paper, "charges that defendant was party to a conspiracy to rob a certain stagecoach of its cargo of minted gold, which was being brought to a certain new bank in Flat Creek; that in furtherance of such conspiracy two innocent men were murdered; and that defendant, being one of those who conspired to rob, is guilty of murder—as guilty as were his co-conspirators."

"To which charges," said Demeree, half-rising, "defendant respectfully pleads not guilty. If he was ever a conspirator, which he denies, he renounced that role before any crime was committed."

Claybrook nodded at a deputy sheriff. "Call Howard P. Elson as a witness." While waiting for his witness, he said, "I fear defendant waited until renunciation was too late. He had gone beyond his point of no return."

"As to that, we shall see," said Demeree.

A robust gentleman with copper-colored hair and long sideburns was shown in and seated. He yawned, sighed, and settled back in his chair. His composure was then so full and complete as to suggest a contemptuous feeling toward all except himself.

Claybrook eyed him coolly, then asked, "What is your name, sir?"

Elson patted back a yawn. "My name, sir, is Howard P. Elson."

"What is your business?"

"I am a banker, sir. Among my numerous financial responsibilities, I am president of Miners and Merchants Bank, recently organized and opened for business in this city. Unfortunately, due to outrageous lack of law enforcement hereabouts, we had no more than organized and opened when we became disorganized and closed."

Claybrook eyed him momentarily with scorn. "Sir, to what misfortune do you refer?"

"I refer to loss of a gold shipment, sir. I refer to a shipment of minted gold—title to which, unfortunately, had passed to us before its loss."

Claybrook's mouth twisted in odd satisfaction. "Will you relate what measures had been taken to insure safety of your gold shipment?"

Elson yawned again. "Yes, sir. I may say I had planned it cleverly. As is well known, a good many stagecoaches arrive in Flat Creek each day from points east. At Granville Junction, I had instructed express agents to place a gold chest on each departing stage coming this way and on a succession of days. All of those chests were decoys, except one, my intent being to confuse possible thieves and robbers. All of those chests reached Flat Creek safely, except one. As it happened, that one contained our bank's gold—thirty thousand dollars in eagles, double-eagles and half-eagles. Robbers had allowed all other stagecoaches to pass unmolested. This one they raided. They could have known which one to attack only be-

cause informed by some signal from a stagecoach passenger. I might add, they could have known only because they received a signal from that young rascal and cutthroat sitting there." He nodded toward defendant Shore.

DEMEREE rose angrily. "Defendant objects, your honor. That pompous goat posing as a witness was not asked to draw conclusions. Nor is it permissible for a witness to draw conclusions and make senile accusations. I fear his dotage and his sidewhiskers have combined to make him an overbearing egotist."

Steele allowed his judicial temperament to lapse. "Demeree, be-consarned if I don't agree with you." He swung toward Claybrook. "Wade, I suggest you keep your witness and his whiskers under better control."

Claybrook sat down. "No more questions."

Demeree came round. "Defendant would like to cross-examine this blowhard, if your honor please."

"Your privilege, Demeree."

Demeree glanced spitefully at the witness. "I believe you said your name is Elson."

"Howard P. Elson, sir."

"Actually it is Howard Pennipincher Elson, is it not?"

"It is, sir."

"I believe you are better known hereabouts as Tightwad Elson, are you not?"

"Now, see here, you impudent, low-born scum, I don't have to put up with insults from trash I wouldn't wipe my foot on."

Steele swung toward Elson. "See hyar yourself. You keep a civil tongue in your head or, be-consarned, you'll find yourself soaking up slobbers in a horse trough." He turned to Demeree. "Any more questions?"

"One more, your honor." Demeree cast upon Elson a tormenting eye. "Are you a stockholder in that Miners and Merchants Bank?"

"I can't see that that's any of your business, sir," snapped Elson.

"I am not promoting my own business," said Demeree. "Justice seems to require that you answer, however."

A growl rose in Steele's throat. "Demeree, you don't have to argue a witness into answering questions. It's a standing order in this court that any man who refuses to answer what's asked him will be hung."

Elson lost composure; he looked scared. "Well, sir," he said, "I do own a small amount of stock."

"But that robbery was of small loss to you, personally; is that correct?"

Elson looked uncomfortable. "I suppose, sir, that is correct."

Demeree returned to his seat. "That is all, your honor."

Claybrook nodded at a deputy. "Show Elson out and bring in Mr. Mole."

A big-mouthed, ugly-faced character in rough clothes and long, uncombed hair was brought in.

Claybrook got up and faced him tolerantly. "Your name, sir?"

"Name's Nicholas Mole."

"Better known as Tater-patch Mole?"

"I reckon so. Yes, sir, I guess that's right. Tater-patch Mole is what I'm mostly called."

Claybrook nodded to his left. "Are you acquainted with a young man named William D. Shore?"

"Yes, sir," said Mole. "That's him right down there. Used to keep his horse at Scrugg Amory's livery barn where I work. He's a right sharp feller, too, with a horse."

"What else is he sharp with?"

"Object," shouted Demeree. "A witness with a glib tongue may not deal in generalities like that."

CLAYBROOK ignored Demeree's objection. "Did William D. Shore have companions when he came with or for his horse?"

"Sometimes he did. Yes, sir. More often than not he did. Mostly he was with somebody."

"Did you know who his companions were?"

"Yes, sir. Knowed some of them. One was Con Jackson. Another was Bat Munster. Another was Fish Dubany. Another was Ship Benson."

"Did you overhear them talking together? That is, talking with William D. Shore?"

Demeree eased up. "Now, your honor, Mr. Claybrook is preparing to ask what somebody said. He can't do that."

"Demeree," said Steele, "being a lawyer, you ought to know that conspirators can't cook up a conspiracy without talk. That's what a conspiracy is. It's talk. Go ahead, Wade. Ask this witness what was said."

Mole did not wait to be asked. He said, "They was talking sort of low, but I heard 'em. I heard part of it. They was putting up their horses one night. Ship Benson said, 'Bill Shore is to be sent to Granville Junction tomorrow to watch for it. When he's sure that gold is loaded, he'll ride stage with it back to Flat Creek. He'll give a signal to let us know which stage to hit.'

"Then Bill Shore said, 'Maybe I don't want to ride stage back to Flat Creek. Maybe I don't want no part in this robbery.'

"Then Bat Munster said, 'You ain't got nothing to say about that. You're just like us. You will do what you're told to do.' That was four days before stage driver Greenbow Larkin and his gun guard Bob Collum was killed by stage robbers."

"Do you know who was boss of this robber gang?"

"No, sir, I don't. There was a boss though; I sure heard 'em talking about a boss."

"That's all," said Claybrook.

Demeree shook his head. "No questions."

Tater-patch Mole was excused, and a young man of alert and superior manner was put in his place. This one had sandy, middle-parted hair, cheeks that looked as if each had an egg inside it and a chin that in consequence was almost non-existent.

Claybrook eyed him with disgust. "Your name is Thadeus March?"

"It is," said March. "And do you want to know who I think. . . ."

Claybrook cut him off. "I'm not interested in who you think."

"But defendant is," said Demeree, getting up. "I suggest this court go into a thinking session for a spell. What this witness thinks is something mankind ought to find most enlightening."

"It is only what this witness *knows* that is material," said Claybrook. "If Mr. Demeree will please await his turn, he may cross-examine."

"Meanwhile," said Demeree, "we should not be denied a hearing of what this witness thinks. In our day a thinker is rare, indeed. Posterity would never forgive us if we failed to record this thinker's thoughts."

"Now listen here," said March. "I came here to testify as a witness, not to be ridiculed."

Claybrook said, "Apparently you believe you came here to think. I merely asked your name, but you proceeded to ask me if I wanted to know who you think."

"If you lawyers don't quit acting so smart, I'll tell you who and what I think. I'll tell you what I think of both of you in no uncertain terms."

STEELE scowled at Claybrook. "Wade, what in tarnation did you

bring this monstrosity in hyar for?"

"I intended to ask him a few questions, if your honor please."

"Then ask them, and never mind what he thinks."

Claybrook puckered his mouth at March and said, "Where do you work?"

"I'm not working anywhere," March answered.

"Where *have* you worked?"

"I've worked a good many places. But if my thinking is correct, I assume you want to know whether I ever worked at Miners and Merchants Bank."

"Your thinking is correct, sir. Why did you quit working there?"

"Old Sideburns fired me. And for no reason at all. And if you want to know who I think...."

"We do," said Demeree. "By all means."

"If your honor please," said Claybrook, "I suggest that Mr. Demeree refrain from his unnecessary and unwarranted interruptions."

Demeree got up again. "May it please your honor, I should regard it as an unforgivable imposition upon all of us if we never permitted this witness to relate what he thinks."

"Now see hyar, Demeree, that will be enough out of you. Set down and wait your turn."

While Demeree eased down Claybrook said to March, "Sir, I am not interested in what you think; I am interested only in what you know. Are you acquainted with defendant William D. Shore?"

March replied sulkily, "I certainly am."

"Did you ever see him loitering about this bank where you worked?"

"I did," said March. "And that's not all. If you want to know who I think was behind that stagecoach robbery, I can tell you."

"Object," said Demeree, rising quickly. "Mr. Claybrook has already disqualified his witness as a thinker. Upon second thought, I agree with Mr. Claybrook that a witness should be permitted to testify as to what he knows, not as to what he thinks."

Claybrook said, "Sir, do you *know* who was boss of that robber outfit?"

"No."

"Do you *know* who planned or instigated that robbery?"

"No."

"But do you *think* you know?"

"Yes."

"Who do you *think* it was?"

"Object!" Demeree shouted indignantly. "Mr. Claybrook can hardly be expected to be fair, but he could at least be consistent."

"Demeree," Steele said coldly, "you set down and stay set."

Claybrook eyed March dubiously for a moment, then he decided to proceed. "Sir, who do you *think* planned and instigated that robbery?"

"I *think* it was old Sideburns."

"Ah! And do you?"

"I certainly do."

"Why do you think that?"

"Because I saw him in close communion with that dude sitting down there. I saw them like that more than once."

"To what dude are you referring?"

"Bill Shore."

"Did you hear anything that was said between them?"

"No. But I sure saw them in close communion."

"Do you mean you saw them talking to each other?"

"Yes."

Claybrook sat down. "No more questions."

DEMEREE waited for a nod from Judge Steele then came round and confronted March. "Young man," he said icily, "you don't like defendant Bill Shore, do you?"

"Why should I?"

"When Mr. Shore exchanged good-mornings with you, what did he call you?"

"He called me by my name."

"He called you Mr. February March, didn't he?"

"What if he did?"

"Oh, nothing, nothing." Demeree went back to his place. "That's all, your honor."

March was taken out. For several seconds thereafter, nothing occurred. Then a couple of deputies came in at a back door with a stretcher or legless cot. Lying thereon was a woman. A third deputy followed with a couple of sawhorses. He placed these in an open space below and in front of Judge Steele. Immediately his companions placed their burden upon them.

Claybrook got up. "If your honor please, this witness is Miss Laney Cue Bentwood. From her waist downward she is paralyzed. Despite that fact, however, her testimony is indispensable. I suggest she be sworn."

Clerk Skiffington got up and screeched at Miss Bentwood. "Lup your right hand." When she had extended her right arm upward, Skiffington continued, "Swear-tell-truth-whole-truth-num-but-truth-self-e-God?"

Miss Bentwood said feebly, "I do."

Judge Steele, as curious as everybody else, leaned forward and peered down at Laney Cue. She was long and slim, most of her body being covered by a sheet and blankets. She didn't look much like an invalid to Steele; he thought she looked about as healthy as any woman he'd ever seen. She looked to be about twenty-five years of age, although he was aware that a man or woman lying face upward had a tendency to look younger than when standing.

Demeree was up, waiting for curiosity to subside. He said, "If your honor please, defendant objects to this witness. A man accused of crime and being tried therefore is entitled to be confronted by his accusers. It is apparent that he is not to be here met face-to-face, but is to be accused through a veil of sympathy and prejudicial frailty. Such a proceeding is not merely prejudicial, it is intolerable."

"If your honor please," said Claybrook, "this lady's testimony cannot be dispersed with. She was an eyewitness to what happened to Greenbow Larkin's stagecoach. She was an eyewitness, also, to defendant's part in that infamous incident. If she is able to sit in a chair and testify, I admit that she should do so. Whether she can is for your honor to decide."

Laney Cue Bentwood moaned, "Oh, no. Oh, no. I am in great pain as it is. I cannot sit up. I cannot."

Steele nodded at Demeree. "Set down, Demeree. If thar's any prejudice in this situation, by thunder, it's your client's hard luck. Go ahead, Wade." He was more reluctant, however, than outward appearances indicated; beconsarned, it was like letting an unarmed man be shot by an invalid. But there was one thing he was not going to do. If Demeree on cross-examination got rough with her, he would not be stopped—unless he got beyond all bounds of reason and respectability.

CLAYBROOK moved out to where he could look down upon Laney Cue Bentwood's face. He said, "Miss Bentwood, you are a resident of Flat Creek, are you not?"

Jurors leaned forward to hear her answer.

She said, "I am."

"What business were you engaged in before your injury?"

"I owned and operated a—a trinket shop."

"Are you acquainted with defendant William D. Shore?"

She turned her head and stared at

the defendant. "To my great sorrow," she moaned, "I am."

"Where were you when Greenbow Larkin's stagecoach was attacked and robbed?"

"I was a passenger on Mr. Larkin's stage."

"Who else was on it?"

"Willie D. Shore—that vicious creature sitting there."

Demeree got up. "Defendant objects, your honor. This prone, whiny female has got no right to call people scurrilous names. A horse-trough bath might prove to be a pool of Bethesda or Siloam for her. Though it probably would not improve her skinny legs, it might at least cure her evil tongue."

That was being a mite rougher than Steele had anticipated. "See hyar, Demeree, you can't talk that way to a lady."

"She can't talk that way about my client, either," said Demeree. "Her looking like an emaciated scarecrow gives her no license to speak maliciously of this defendant."

Claybrook intervened indignantly. "Now, your honor, if anybody is being maliciously uncomplimentary, it is Mr. Demeree himself. It should be apparent to everyone who can see her that Miss Bentwood is a beautiful young woman, in nowise emaciated or skinny. But Mr. Demeree's method and motive are quite understandable; he is aware that this lady's testimony will put a noose around his client's neck. He can only prevent that result by discrediting or by excluding her testimony."

"I insist that it should be both discredited and excluded," said Demeree.

"It has been ruled otherwise," said Claybrook with a haughty lift of his eyebrows. He looked down at Laney Cue again. "Miss Bentwood, will you please relate what occurred while you were a passenger on Larkin's stagecoach?"

"Yes," Miss Bentwood replied. "But if you will spare me all needless details, I shall appreciate it. May I relate only those final events?"

"Certainly," said Claybrook.

"Well, we were passing through a place called Lickrock Flat and traveling at a moderate pace when Mr. Larkin's guard, a man named Robert Collum, was heard to yell, 'There they come.' "

"Who heard him yell?" asked Claybrook.

"Well, I did. Bill Shore also heard him. Riding with us was also a girl, a simple-minded young thing named Kitty Diggles. She heard him, too. We looked out and saw them almost immediately. They were riding down a rocky slope. Nothing happened until they were down on flat ground. Then they began shooting at us. Why he behaved so crazily I don't know, but Greenbow Larkin put his four horses into a run. His guard began shooting, too."

"What did defendant Shore do meanwhile?"

"Oh, he pretended to be shooting at those robbers. But he didn't come within a mile of hitting anybody; he was shooting almost straight up."

"Did Bob Collum hit any of them?"

"Poor Bob killed two of them."

"What happened to Larkin and Bob Collum?"

"They were both killed."

"What happened to your stagecoach?"

"Well, our horses ran wild for almost a mile, then a wheel hit something and our stage turned over. That's when my back was broken."

CLAYBROOK remained silent a moment for dramatic effect, then asked, "Miss Bentwood, before that robber attack commenced, had you observed William Shore's behavior?"

"Oh, yes."

"What did he do?"

"He'd been looking out as if watching for something or somebody. Then suddenly he took a large white handkerchief from his coat and held it out at a window. Whether he waved it, I don't know. But it would not have mattered anyhow, because a stiff wind was blowing; anyone at a distance could have seen it fluttering."

"How soon thereafter did this attack commence?"

"It was just a little while, possibly a minute."

After a brief pause, Claybrook asked, "Miss Bentwood, prior to appearance of those robbers were you aware that your stage carried a chest of gold coins?"

"Oh, no. I had no idea." She moaned pitifully and said, "Mr. Claybrook, can't you spare me now?"

Claybrook backed away. "I believe that will be sufficient. Thank you very much."

Demeree got up. "If your honor please, I should like to cross-examine this old hag."

Steele's blood pressure soared instantly. "Consarn you, Demeree, you knowed better than talk like that."

"I meant no disrespect to this honorable court," said Demeree. "I apologize for what may have seemed otherwise."

"All right, cross-examine."

Demeree came round and stood over Miss Bentwood. Ferocity gleamed between her eyes and his.

Demeree said, "You are acquainted with a certain banker named Tightwad Elson, are you not?"

"I have met Mr. Elson, yes," Miss Bentwood replied coldly.

"You have rather studiously cultivated his friendship, have you not?"

She turned her face away from Demeree. A sob came from her throat. "Must I be tortured by this horrible creature?"

"You heard my question," said Demeree.

She began to weep. In a moment she was hysterical.

Steele growled at Demeree, "You let up thar, by thunder. That's no way to treat a woman. That's no way to treat even a well and hearty woman."

"If your honor please," said Demeree stubbornly, "while this female is recovering from her hysterics, I should like to put on my own witness. But I'm not through with this creature. I reserve defendant's right to question her further when she has sufficiently recovered."

Steele glanced at Claybrook. "Wade, have you got any more witnesses?"

"No, your honor."

"All right, Demeree. Bucky, have this woman kept in back until she's called for. Demeree, fetch your witness."

When Miss Bentwood had been carried out, Demeree nodded at a deputy sheriff. "Bring in Miss Kitty Diggles."

MISS DIGGLES was a pretty, blue-eyed blonde of somewhere between sixteen and twenty. In Steele's opinion she had been spoiled in her upbringing, for she seemed to regard everybody as her friend; she even smiled pleasantly at him.

Demeree came round to question her. "So your name is Kitty Diggles?"

She looked at him solemnly. "Yes. Isn't it awful?"

Demeree appeared surprised. "You mean Kitty is an awful name?"

"Now, you know what I mean, Mr. Demeree."

"Well, now, if it's *Diggles* you have reference to, I'm sure some fine young man will soon change that. Most any man would be glad to do so."

Claybrook eased up. "If your honor

please, this exchange of levity has no relevancy whatever."

"Superficially, Mr. Claybrook is right," said Demeree. "Actually I had in mind reassuring Miss Diggles that she is among friends and may speak freely." Demeree became serious. "Now, young lady, you were a passenger on Greenbow Larkin's stagecoach when it was recently attacked by robbers. Right?"

"Yes, I was, but I hope never to be again."

Demeree nodded. "Who else were passengers?"

"Why, Mr. Shore was one. There he is, sitting right down there."

"Who else?"

"A woman. Her name was Miss Bentwood. Mr. Shore called her Curlicue Bentwood."

"Do you mean Laney Cue?"

"I believe that was her true name, really."

"Did Mr. Shore and Miss Bentwood behave on friendly terms with respect to each other?"

"Oh, my, no. She even shot at him."

Demeree looked abashed. "Not really!"

"She sure did. After she had waved her handkerchief out of a window and those bandits had come charging down on us, Mr. Shore drew a big gun and before you could say scat shot two of them off their horses. Miss Bentwood drew a little gun from her reticule and aimed it at Mr. Shore's head. But just as she shot, a rock or something bumped us real hard and she missed."

"Then what happened?"

"Well, Mr. Larkin and his guard had already dropped off, both killed by bandits. Nobody was left to drive our horses, so they ran away. They kept running until we turned over and broke loose from them. I guess those robbers thought all three of us were dead. As soon as they found what they were after they took it and hurried off. I heard one of them yell, 'Hurry it up, somebody's coming.' Three deputy sheriffs arrived a few minutes later. I was able to get out by myself, but they had to help Miss Bentwood and Mr. Shore. I guess that's about all."

Demeree said, "I guess that's about enough."

Claybrook got up as Demeree went to his seat.

Claybrook said, "Miss Diggles, are you in love with this young Mr. Shore?"

Kitty looked tenderly at defendant. "Well, I guess it's a little early for us to be in love. But he did say...."

"Just answer my questions, please."

"Hold on thar," snapped Steele. "Lady, what did Bill Shore say?"

Kitty looked round at Steele. She was shy, as one truly in love. "He said.... Well, he said he had not meant to come back to Flat Creek anymore but that he'd changed his mind when he learned I was coming to Flat Creek to live with my aunt and uncle. He said he'd been offered a good job with a mining company and meant to take it. He really did ask me to marry him."

"Now, your honor," said Claybrook, "it is quite obvious that this young lady is merely saying what somebody has told her to say."

DEMEREE rose furiously. "That's an insult. That's a lowdown, cowardly, insulting falsehood."

"What she has said is both unreasonable and untruthful," retorted Claybrook. "Her statements are entitled to no credence whatever. They are merely something devised and rehearsed to play up defendant as a hero instead of what he actually is—namely, a bloodthirsty robber and murderer."

"From being a gentleman, such as I have long given him credit for be-

ing," said Demeree warmly, "Mr. Claybrook has joined ranks with contemptible scoundrels."

"That's enough," roared Steele. "Any time you lawyers want to lock horns outside this court room, it will be all right with me. But you don't do it in hyar."

Demeree said contritely, "I most humbly apologize to your honor for this unseemly behavior."

"Claybrook," snapped Steele, "question your witness."

"I have no more questions," responded Claybrook, "but I should like to have Miss Bentwood brought back by way of rebuttal."

"Fetch her," said Steele, nodding at Buckalew's deputies.

Kitty Diggles was shown out and Miss Bentwood was carried in and placed as before.

Claybrook advanced and looked down at her face. "Miss Bentwood, during that stagecoach robbery, did you shoot at defendant William Shore?"

Miss Bentwood gasped. "What an absurd question."

"But did you?"

"Of course not. I had no weapon with which to shoot at anybody."

"Did you put a handkerchief or white cloth out and wave it shortly before your stage was attacked?"

"Oh, dear, no. I told you who did it. It was that dreadful Bill Shore."

Claybrook backed to his chair. "That is all, your honor."

Demeree came round leisurely. He had some loose papers which he appeared to be studying. When he was near Miss Bentwood's stretcher he apparently found a question he had intended to ask.

His face and voice softened. "Miss Bentwood, if I have heretofore appeared to be rude, I hope you will overlook it."

She gave no response, except to turn her face slightly away from him.

Demeree said gently, "It may seem unkind, but I trust you will forgive me for insisting upon a few more questions."

She gave him no response.

A paper slipped from Demeree's hands. He soon after missed it, looked for it and discovered it near his feet. Quietly he stooped to pick it up. While in a stooped position he put his right hand under Miss Bentwood's stretcher and suddenly jabbed a stickpin deeply into her bottomside.

Spectators, jurors and others were shocked by a frightful scream. Miss Bentwood bowed her body upward and landed erect off her cot. She stood solidly on both feet and rubbed her right hip at its most rearward point.

After a moment a horrified expression came over her hard face. "My God!" she murmured. "What have I done to myself?"

Then she looked at Demeree, murder in her flashing eyes. "You... You beast!" She grabbed bedclothing from her erstwhile bed. Meanwhile she muttered words of murder.

DEMEREE extended his right hand. On its palm lay a pearl-handled derringer. "Were you looking for this, Miss Bentwood? It was lying under your blanket." An instant before she snatched at it, he withdrew it from her reach.

"Oh, you beast!" she screamed. "If somebody will give me a gun, I'll kill you."

Demeree turned and rejoined his client. When there, he faced Judge Steele. "Your honor, it is not among my duties to apprehend murderers, but I think you are looking at a female variety of that undesirable species. Mention has been made that Bat Munster and his fellow-robbers had a boss.

I think you are also looking at their boss when you look at Curlicue Bentwood."

While Demeree talked, Curlicue looked for an avenue of escape. She saw what appeared to be an open aisle; she took it at a fast walk.

"Stop her," Steele roared.

He was pleased when some of his old ex-vigie friends got in her path and overcame her violent and profane attempts to force her way out.

Steele muttered to himself. "Point of no return, by thunder." He gave his head a sidewise jerk. "You jurors fetch in a verdict."

After a brief absence they returned. A tall, bony gold-digger remained standing. "Not guilty, Judge."

Steele accepted their verdict without comment. He accepted it as meaning that in their opinion Golden Shore had not gone beyond his point of no return. But when peaceful citizens got murdered, by thunder, somebody ought to pay for it with his neck. Somebody would, too. Some murdering robbers were running at large who would pay for it yet. There was plenty of time.

The School Days of Cowboy Swoke

by G. A. Edwards

Dolores Sweete, pert and petite,
A charmer at eighteen,
Taught school each day to earn her way,
At Cactus-on-the-Green;
She taught small tots their jots and dots,
And kept their faces clean.

Came Lasso Swoke, a young cowpoke,
Who sought to corral bliss;
A gay young man old cowmen ban,
And speak of with a hiss,
A bold young blade who liked to raid
Warm lips and take a kiss.

Then Lasso saw, and with some awe,
Miss Sweete, and thought her great.
Right off the bat he doffed his hat,
And asked her for a date;
She said, "No! No!" He said, "So, so,
I will matriculate!"

At twenty-two, gay Lasso knew
That two and two make four;
But nonetheless he made a guess
That he could learn some more;
He stayed a year in the first grade,
Because there was none lower!

He spent that year with Miss Sweete near,
She taught him, but in vain.
She thought there must be much sawdust
In first-grade Lasso's brain—
He seemed to shed all knowledge fed
Like a bunkhouse sheds the rain!

The second year, with a sad tear,
She saw the cowboy come.
He brought his lunch, some fresh-made punch,
Made from bourbon and rum;
She saw the chump as a big lump
On her curriculum!

Then did Miss Sweete lay down a neat
And stern and iron-clad rule—
That Lasso Swoke, the dull cowpoke,
Must cease to be a fool;
To do this she would thenceforth see
He stayed in after school!

She kept him in, he had some gin,
Those in the know aver
That learning's flow for young Lasso
Would need some other spur—
And that Miss Sweete will not repeat
The things Lasso taught her!

THE END

HOPELESS RANGE

Novelet

by E. E. Clement

Riding a hunch, Steve Dill came to this bitter land — came and found that he wasn't intended to leave...

THE NARROW gauge had left the writhing streams of dust behind and the land in the rolling foothills was losing its bleak, hard shine under the high sun. Now the green tips of cacti pushed spurs through the throttling sand and the dirt fog in the air let what seemed to be a normal amount of sunshine pierce the windows of the day coach.

But the lightness was deceiving, like the whole of this territory. The air, like the country, was loaded with sudden death. Any man who wanted to keep breathing should flee Blackhawk, not approach it.

But with every grind and jerk of the train wheels Steve Dill was approaching it. That he intended to kill a man was unimportant. It hasn't mattered before, but now he was reaching avid hands for the jackpot, twisting the tail of the rainbow. He was in —on easy street—and it would take only the sudden blasting of guns to put him there.

His clothing was black as the ace of spades, and the sharp creases in his trousers came down over his black boots. A green and white narrow cord wandered around the band of the flat-crowned stetson. His dark green shirt made a grudging background for his black tie.

The sun and the wind and the rain had burned and blackened his thin face until the whites of his eyes seemed perpetually to be flashing in murderous anger; and the red of his thin lips was as brilliant as the sudden bubbling of blood. His agile hands kept flexing, clenching and unclenching, as if in continual combat with unseen demons. The mark of the killer —and of many things both good and sordid—was on him. And of most of them he was proud.

Dust insinuated itself beneath the window and squirmed snake-like along the sill to fall unheeded in Dill's lap. He had learned many miles back in the depths of the dust bowl to ignore it. It was useless to do otherwise. Dust

was king here and dancing a macabre dance of death.

Beyond the windows of the train, bags of bone and hide that once had been cattle stood ankle-deep in the moving dirt, their heads and tails down, their legs spread wide in hopelessness. They already were dead, waiting only for another day or so to make the fact official.

They were curiously like Blackhawk itself when Dill alighted on the train platform. Once Blackhawk had known only fertility; now there was hopelessness and the aura of death everywhere in the choking air. Those who remained were like the cattle, with heads down, waiting...waiting...

Dill felt good about it. One more death, more or less, would practically go unnoticed here. He picked up his carpetbag and swung lightly through the dust. He was tall and curiously lithe for so large a man, and his heavy shoulders seemed to sway in utter confidence with every long step he took.

The tug of the slug through the brim of his black hat, the flat slap of the shot, simply made the shoulders hunch, turned his feet at an angle to whence the shot had come...and his legs moved more rapidly in a tantalizing feinting sidestep.

Two ponies at the hitching rack jerked up their heads. A man coming out of the hotel hastily ducked back inside, leaving Dill alone in the middle of the deserted street.

Dill's chin was thrust forward, the whites of his blue eyes bright in hard brilliance. They swept the store fronts, the shadowed corners and up the roofs and the false fronts of the buildings.

There was silence, deep and penetrating. A sudden gust of wind made a brief whirlpool near Dill's shuffling feet. Spiritlessly it died and the dust went twisting across the ground like a well-fed snake.

PUZZLED, Steve Dill picked up his bag with his left hand, keeping the gun in his right, backing a zig-zag course to the hotel. He heard the door open at his back. Spinning abruptly he plunged into the dark safety of the dust lobby. The door slammed behind him.

A heavy man in a dark eyeshade came across the lobby and went behind the desk.

The cowboy Dill had seen briefly duck back into the hotel stood deep in the rear of the lobby, mouth twitching, and fingers hooked into his gun belt.

The man in the eyeshade leaned across the desk, his eyes flat with curiosity. "Close shave—that," he said conversationally.

Dill holstered his gun, watching the bleak street. "Why in hell anyone wants to shoot at me, I don't know," he said almost to himself. "What goes on here anyway?"

The man in the eyeshade studied him. Finally he pushed forward the register. "Room?"

Dill signed.

The man looked at the register and pushed back his eyeshade.

"Then you ain't Gates?"

"I'm Steve Dill—just what it says on the register."

"Hum-m. We don't see many strangers here of late—unless they got a reason to be here," he added suggestively.

The clerk obviously was inviting confidences that were none of his damn business, Dill decided, and ducked the issue with: "Who is this Gates you were expecting?"

"A man," the clerk said laconically. "A rich man—very rich. Like as not he might even save this twice-damned burg. Maybe—just maybe—if he lives."

"If a man might save a town why should anyone want to shoot him?"

The clerk's eyes suddenly were veiled. "If you don't know—then I shore don't know—or want to know—why you came here."

The man in the back of the lobby came forward in a slow shuffle. His eyes, wide with hidden fears, studied Dill's face. His white face was lined with pain, and the pain was obvious in every limping step he took. He was a cautious man, and a frightened one at that, Dill decided.

"I—I thought for a moment that you might—just might—be the help we need," he said to Dill. "Gates should send a front man on if he's smart. We wrote him that this was liable to be tough."

"I wouldn't be talking too much about it, Joe," a voice said from the stairway. "After all—this man is a stranger."

Dill turned swiftly, his nerves still ragged from the close brush in the street.

The woman on the stairway was calm, petite, definitely pretty. But her eyes, too, hid inner fears.

"He a Bible pounder, Mom?" the youngster holding her hand chirped. He was somberly studying Dill's dust-covered black clothing.

The woman's eyes looked from Dill's hard face to his thonged gun and smiled. "I doubt it, son," she said. "In many ways I think this is a town that maybe the Lord just forgot for a spell."

STEVE DILL'S thin lips split in a ready grin. This situation was baffling in all its implications, and he wanted to establish his own status as rapidly as possible. To do so was also the best insurance obtainable to still too-itchy trigger fingers.

"The only thing I pound, son," he said slowly, "is a deck of cards. In fact some people say I pound them too well."

"Just a gambler," the clerk muttered in disgust. "An' comin' to a place where nobody is interested in anything as small as a card game any more."

Dill's hands were flexing again. Was he being called penny-ante, a tinhorn? He couldn't be sure. The clerk was all mouth and what brain cells he had rattled through his teeth.

"What he's trying to say, Mr. Dill," the woman said hurriedly, "Is that the whole town is playing for big stakes—something much bigger than a card game. The town is broke, too. There's nothing here for you. I would suggest you catch the evening train before you, too, are unable to depart."

The paradox intrigued Dill...big stakes...broke town...a warning to leave. His pulses set up a sudden pounding. The combination of big stakes and danger was a challenge.

His motive in coming here—to kill a man—had been a similar challenge. But whatever hovered so grimly over this desolate town had nothing whatsoever to do with his original plan. Maybe, by comparison, his original intention was strictly penny-ante...

"Maybe you're right," he said. "The town looks pretty deserted."

"Hah. That's what you think," the clerk rattled.

THE PALE man took a limping step forward, and motioned with one arm to the woman and boy. "My wife, Mrs. Holcomb, and my son, young Joey. I'm Joe Holcomb—one time rancher, so to speak." This last bitterly.

Dill bowed to the woman and took Holcomb's extended hand. Hard-calloused, it was wet with clammy nervousness.

"Sell your ranch, or did it just blow away?" Dill prodded.

"I still own the land—for just two more days. There's nothing on it now.

Everything was dying and blowing away—but I guess it wasn't blowing away fast enough. We got burned out a week ago."

"Burned out?"

"That's right. Night riders. This is a busy place at night. Murder rides with the torch. At day it's just murder on the street if you head for anywhere except the railroad station. You're sure of living only if you're getting out. And only a certain type coming in are sure of living."

"Meaning?"

"Killers. Hired ones. The town is full of them."

Dill tensed. Killers! The very snap of the word was as ominous as if was baffling. The weather and the dust were destroying this town. What the elements failed to accomplish hired gunmen were doing. Dill recognized, with a shock, that he had plunged unwittingly into something extraordinary. It made him feel good.

"Joe," the woman reminded again. "Mr. Dill is a stranger. Don't talk too much."

She looked levelly at Steve Dill. "At this point, Mr. Dill, it might be fatal for a stranger to know too much about this situation. In a few days—provided Mr. Gates arrives in time—it will be safe again. To take sides with us—the townfolks—for Brady or Ewell couldn't possibly alter the situation. Get out while you can and—"

"Brady?" mused Dill. "You mean Ralph Brady has a hand in this?"

IN THE SUDDEN stillness he heard the clerk draw a quick breath. The friendliness in the woman's face was gone with the fleetness of thought. Joe Holcomb mouthed an inaudible curse.

"So you're one of them?" the woman said bitterly. "So you know Ralph Brady? Is this some new trick—sending a killer here—to the only sanctuary we have left?"

"I know Brady," Dill admitted. "I've gambled with him—but by Gawd I don't work for him! Does that satisfy you, Mrs. Holcomb?"

"Good day Mr. Dill," she said with a woman's unreasonableness. Her back stiff, she turned and led the youngster upstairs.

"Bye, deck pounder," the boy called over his shoulder.

"You forgot something, Mrs. Holcomb," Dill called out. Why he wanted her to understand puzzled him. It just seemed important.

She turned and looked down the stairwell.

"Remember?" Dill held his hat aloft and pushed a finger through the bullet hole.

Her set expression didn't change. "Good day, Mr. Dill."

Dill shrugged and put the hat back on his head.

"She sees red whenever she hears Brady's name," Joe Holcomb said apologetically. "Yuh see, Brady shot me about a month ago. The bullet is still lodged against my spine."

"Fair fight?" Dill was unimpressed.

"I—I guess it was fair. I was drunk. I didn't like the way Brady was dealing. He had me broke and was pouring in the salt."

Dill frowned. A gun fight at a card table was okay. But a fight with a drunken card player was not. It was sort of an unwritten law.

In a way he felt good that he had found out about this. It gave him a reason—backed by minor anger—to kill Brady. He hadn't had an reason except greed before, and his lack of anger against Brady had been irritating him ever since he had heard about the locket Brady wore on his heavy gold watch chain. Possession of that locket was the equivalent to owning a gold mine...

- 2 -

THE FRONT door came open and a short and round man with expressionless eyes came in. He was flanked by a tall tobacco-chewing youth with a slack jaw.

They came right over to Steve Dill, and the short man looked up and said: "I don't know why you're here, partner, but I'm tellin' yuh to catch the down train. That'll be in a half hour."

Dill looked down at the star on the man's unbuttoned vest. "I'm not quite ready for that yet. Any objections?"

"Plenty," the man snapped. "It's my job to keep law and order, Dill, an' I'm tellin' yuh to get out."

"Law an' order—" Holcomb muttered sardonically.

Dill backed to the desk and spread his arms. The man knew his name. That could mean but one thing.

"So you're taking orders from Brady, huh?" he said softly.

The sheriff looked surprised. Then unashamedly, "Alright put it thataway then. I'm telling yuh that Ralph Brady said for yuh to get the hell out. He saw you standing in the street like a clay pigeon."

Dill tossed back his head and laughed. "Brady is gettin' too big for his britches. Go back an' tell him that I said to go to hell and to break out a fresh deck. I'm coming down there after I wash up and intend playing a little..."

Too late he saw the sheriff look past his shoulder with widened eyes. He ducked too late to avoid the heavy inkwell in the hands of the desk clerk.

The lobby tilted on a sharp angle until the floor was before Dill and rushing straight at him. It collided with his chin and spun off into impenetrable darkness.

He saw the cobwebs first as dim and far away as a lost cloud. Then he felt the hard boards in back of his aching head. He tried to roll away from the ache and gasped as he fell. The fall was short, simply from a long bench to the floor of the train station, he finally determined.

He got unsteadily to his feet and reached for his gun. The holster was empty.

"We packed it away where it'd be safe," a voice said. "It's in your carpetbag."

THE SHERIFF and his chawing sider were leaning negligently against the door of the station.

"We was sorta hopin' that you'd wake up before the train came in," the sheriff said. "We just didn't want to pour yuh on like any two-bit drunk. We don't like to do that to any friend of Brady's. People liable to start thinkin' Brady don't take good keer of his pals."

Dill's mouth twisted. Brady... Brady would dare do this to him. Killing Brady now would be a down-right pleasure and not just a short path to riches.

On unsteady feet he approached the sheriff. "Got the makin'?" he asked.

The sheriff put a bag of Bull Durham in Dill's trembling hands. Dill dropped it, and bent groggily to retrieve it. The sheriff grunted and bent far over, reaching a sure hand for the sack.

Dill's weaving had came up with a sudden lunge, smashing against the sheriff's downthrust chin.

With the motion on his pivot upward, Dill hooked a vicious left to the moving jaws of the tobacco chewer.

For a split second the dull eyes flickered in amazement and the jaws were still as his hand streaked for his holstered gun.

It never reached the gun. The sid-

er's knees gave away and he started to slide to the floor. Dill hit him twice more on the way down.

He rubbed his bruised knuckles and looked down at the two still forms. "Brady should a told you—among other things—that I don't smoke."

He went to his carpetbag in the middle of the room and retrieved his short barreled and pearl handled six-gun. He reloaded it, frowning in concentration.

Cautiously he put his hat on his aching head. He still had a job to do —kill a man—and get a locket from him.

ON HIS WAY out he bent and removed the guns from the sheriff and his sider. In the dusk outside he threw them into the weeds on the far side of the tracks.

The street apparently was deserted. The lights in the hotel were burning, and farther down the street a dozen horses stood hitched before where more lights burned—Brady's saloon.

Dill grunted, retreated to the station and made a wide circle in the darkness past the limits of the town and cautiously approached Brady's from the rear.

The air was heavy, choking, and sounds came dully. In the light breeze Dill could feel dry, powdery dirt brush his face. This was a helluva country, worse than a ready-made desert. Yet there was a bitter—apparently one-sided—war being fought over it.

It came to Dill then what it might be—what it had to be. The land itself was worthless. Nothing could grow on it, it could sustain nothing...its topsoil had went in for aviation. So there was only one answer to this high stakes game.

It was what was *under* the ground that was valuable.

Oil! That was it Oil! A word of magic and untold wealth...

With his hand pressed against the rear door of Brady's saloon, Dill paused. This was something strictly blue chips, bigger than what he had come for. The locket Brady carried might mean a little slice of some mines—maybe—but a slice of this haul might set a man up for life.

Abruptly he decided to cut himself in—if possible—and to permit Brady to continue living—at least temporarily—unless forced into an immediate tight.

Dill was an opportunist, a very adroit one, and that he occasionally had to even double-cross himself was strictly in character. He couldn't remember when he had ever given anyone a fair shake, including himself. If he had, it must have been long ago, and strictly by accident...

GUN IN HIS right hand, he pushed the door open. Its squeaking in the darkness seemed loud to Dill, but it faltered and died in the raucous wave of voices up front.

Steve Dill treaded his way carefully between piled cases until the areaway made a right angle turn. Light came from a partly open door. From inside the room voices droned.

In front, bellied-up against the bar were perhaps a dozen men. They were a rough-looking crew, strictly tinhorn, but exceedingly dangerous because of the very futility of their lives. Dill recognized a few, and knew them for what they were—hired killers. He recalled the horses hitched outside, saw that every man was armed. They were drinking steadily with grim determination—and they were doing it on the house. There were no other customers and the cash till hung empty beneath the bar.

Dill's lips slitted. When Brady scorned picking up loose silver—the game he sought must be big time. He was a cautious man in all but his gambling, but then he was wicked. Dill knew. After all, he'd had to go all out on two different occasions to break Brady. Considering that Brady

was an ace finagler in his own right, that had taken some doing.

The time had come to try to outfinagle Brady again—this time for very high stacks of very blue and rich chips...

Keeping close to the wall he approached the door. Voices became distinct.

"...an' being a gimpy now, we should give Holcomb a little getaway money. Say maybe a dinky thousand. He's got that wife an' that kid an'..."

"Don't be going soft now," a heavy voice rumbled. "We've done everything but kill him to back him into the corner he's in. You got him drunk, swindled him and finally shot him. Only I must say it wasn't a very good job, 'cause he's still alive. And I kept loaning him money on that two-bit spread of his on the hill—money that you then cheated him out of. In two more days I'll own that spread—lock, stock and barrel. Now what in hell should I give him a thousand to get away on? His bullheadedness has made this caper a lot tougher than it should have been. On top of all that—I don't like a weak man or a man that talks too much."

"Yore pretty good at talk yourself, Ewell. That's all yuh been doing, sitting back and talking while me and the boys did all the dirty work." Dill recognized Brady's high-pitched voice. "An' I ain't so sure just how'd you'd stand in a fight. You'd sell your own mother's soul for a plugged two-bit piece. I'm sticking close to you—damned close—until we cash in on this jackpot."

"I take it you don't trust me, Brady."

"You take it right. I sure as tootin' don't. And I'm saying again—as half partner in this deal—you go give Holcomb a thousand dollars day after tomorrow when you foreclose that mortgage. After all we're—we're—relatives, like maybe so."

"Haurmp! Just because you both came out of the same orphanage at St. Joe don't make you brothers."

"A man can't always tell in a deal like that... He's weak—like you said—an' I don't like him. An' I'm maybe a skunk—like you—but I ain't quite as lowdown as you. He's got a right to get his wife an' kid outa here."

"The little woman looks pretty good to you, don't she Brady?"

"She does—an' she is good," Brady yelped. "She's too damned good, that's the trouble. I told her she could stick around for the payoff—her an' the kid—but she wouldn't play ball. Sometimes I think women are plain unreasonable just because they're so plumb dumb."

DILL GRINNED in the darkness. Same old Brady. Same old egoist. Always out-smarting himself. This shouldn't be too tough. Brady was throwing his weight around and getting away with it. And Brady could be had for—down deep—there was a saffron streak as wide as a mule's back in Brady. He was brave when he had the bulge, but there was no bulge in a taut rope.

"Oh, hell, all right," Ewell rumbled. "I'll give them a thousand. Now that damned Chinaman who won't leave the hill should have a thousand, too, I suppose?"

"No. Me an' the boys will take care of him tonight—for good. He had his chance to sell an' run off like most of the others. Only, like some of the others, he didn't scare. So the same thing that happened to the others who wouldn't scare will happen to him. He can stay on the damned hill—stay on it—six feet under—forever. He an' the Holcombs are the last ones. You can fix up the papers. Day after tomorrow you own the whole damn hill—an' you're signing half of it over to me. Right?"

"Right," said Ewell. "Don't take too long on the Chinaman. Pay off the boys an' get them out of town tonight. Then you an' me can sit tight

until the geologists we sent for arrive Saturday."

"That's cuttin' the pie pretty thin. I wish there was one of those sidewinders I could trust. We might need an extra gun before this is through."

"All that's be left that interests us is a crippled man, a woman and a little boy. That's all you got to handle, Brady. You should be able to do a little thing like that."

"No... It 'tain't."

"It ain't what?"

"All I gotta handle."

"What else?"

"You!"

STEVE DILL put his hand against the door and pushed it open. He stepped softly in the room and leaned carelessly against the wall, gun in hand.

"Evening," Brady," he said. Then, as Brady and a monstrous bulk of a man started to come to their feet, he said: "Sit tight, gentlemen. It's just a friendly call." He moved his gun suggestively, and the pair sagged back in their chairs.

"It shore as hell don't look like it," Brady said shrilly. His wide eyes in his white face were riveted on the gun. He was a small thin wasp of a man, nervous and fast, and surprisingly tough in a fight.

"Who—who are you?" the big man rumbled. Incongruously, he wore a cutaway cloth coat, and his sagging chins all but obliterateed his stiff collar. The power he exuded overcame his fright. There was lots of muscle in his big belly. He was not the type of man for an egoist like Brady to dicatate to. He was smart, tough and wouldn't push easily. Dill realized that Brady had outsmarted himself again—that if a showdown came Brady wouldn't have any chips to pick up for cashing.

"Looks like I just arrived in time," Dill said softly. To himself he admitted that was right. There would be no pleasure in taking Brady if the big man had left nothing to take...

"Who is this?" the big man demanded.

"A friend of mine," Brady said dourly. "A gambler, a sidewinder and a smart son. Name's Steve Dill— an' he's strictly poison." Then to Dill, "This hunk of lard is a banker an' a damned thief."

"It's a pleasure to meet my own kind," Dill said. "Now that we understand each other I'd like to apply for that extra gun job that you got open Brady."

"Yah. I knew it!" Brady yelped. "Yuh always did take the big pots."

"My price is cheap— I'm a good gun hand," Dill said. "Also I'm in the driver's seat and I'm perfectly willing to let you men keep two-thirds."

He looked at the locket on Brady's watch chain, and licked his lips. It was golden, finely hand-made, and of unforgetable design. From its upper rounded edges two golden horns swept out and forward and the head of a bull had been expertly traced into its surface. Dill doubted that there was another like it in the whole world.

Ewell jerked upright in his chair, his chins thrusting forward. "We don't give a third of anything away just on a man's say-so. Get out of here—and get out of town." The whistle of the train sounded dimly in the distance.

"I should be on that," Dill said. "But I didn't think it proper that I shouldn't call on my friend Brady when I was here. There's a few things about Kaycee that I wanted to talk over with him."

BRADY'S head came up and there was murder in his eyes.

Dill laughed aloud and Brady flinched. The Kaycee thing had been the major of his many mistakes. He had just been passing through, and had taken a hand in a game with some big cattlemen. Adroitly he had steadily marked a deck with his thumb nail. He'd been doing fine.

Then a suspicious cattleman—one of the biggest and most influential in the territory—had called for a new deck. In the following hand Brady had gone all out with a queen and tray full house. Before the draw the cattlemen had asked that the deck be cut. He drew one card, and Brady dealt him the top card. It had given him an ace high-seven full.

He'd broken Brady. Brady had sat there, stunned. The game broke up and the cattlemen bellied up to the bar. Brady had taken the deck and pressed hard upon it with a right-handed cut. The next card down was an ace. He'd tried it again—and again—and always the next card had been an ace. He'd been slick-backed.

Only Dill, watching from the end of the bar, had seen Brady's covert moves. And only Dill, because he probably was the only man in the room who knew Brady, knew what he probably would do next.

When crossed or bitterly disappointed, Brady's fury was blind and unreasoning. It always would be.

But he'd made a mistake of mammouth proportions. Had he accused the cattleman of cheating and forced him to draw, that would have given him a reasonable excuse with the law. But he hadn't. He'd simply walked up to the cattleman, spun him around, and shot him three times in the stomach. Then he'd put a hanging crown on his mistake by taking the cattleman's money before fleeing. Kaycee still had a price on his head and a waiting rope.

THAT WAS Dill's ace now—that was why he was so certain Brady could be had.

"Yuh can't get away with this, Dill," Brady shrilled. That high-pitched, almost womanish voice, always had amused Dill, but he had never been deceived by it. A few, now deceased, unfortunates had.

"I think I can," Dill said. "I think you have something on the Marshal the way you're throwing your weight around. Even if you haven't, there's enough happened here to hang both of you if the law comes in."

"Hah. We own the law," Ewell rumbled.

"I just took care of *your* law," Dill reminded "I'm talking about other law that can't be bought."

"There won't be no strange law coming in here."

"There will be if anything happens to me," Dill bluffed. "You see, before leaving Aurora to come up here to see Brady I left a note to be opened if I didn't return. What's in that note will interest Kaycee—and hang Brady."

Brady cursed.

A canny gleam came into Ewell's little eyes. "That's interesting—very interesting. And for that you believe you should have a third interest in this? And just what is this we're after, Dill?"

"Geologists usually are interested in what's below ground," Dill said levelly. "It doesn't take a particularly smart man to figure that out. You men can be satisfied with a third each—or nothing each—and you can make your choice right now."

Brady slumped in his chair. "You're a damned snake, Dill, but I know you can be trusted in a caper that might be a mite illegal."

"Hazing ranchers and murdering them is illegal, and sometimes downright fatal to all parties," Dill murmured.

Ewell had been frowning in concentration. He sat back and smiled thinly in sudden decision.

"You've got us by the short horns," he admitted. "I could have you killed by simply letting out a cry. But if I did that, Brady might kill me."

"So?"

"So to earn your third—and become one of us, so to speak—tonight you will kill a certain stubborn Chinaman.

By doing so you'll be as deeply involved as we are, and we'll know we can trust you. That's my only and final word in the matter. Now either holster your gun—or use it. That's your only choice."

Dill looked at the huge man, and knew he wasn't bluffing. He could be pushed only so far. That he intended yelling for the gunslingers up front was unmistakable, and there were far too many of them for Dill to handle.

Ewell's eyes were boring into him. As a gambler, Dill knew a reluctant admiration for the big man. It was all for nothing, and Ewell had sprung the joker as his hole card. Grudgingly he holstered his gun.

Brady blew out a great sigh of relief.

Ewell looked at Brady and jerked his thumb at the door. "Go after the Chinaman. Clear this thing up. Dill will do the actual killing."

Brady grinned wickedly. "Remember. I told you I was sticking close to you from now on out. You're comin' along too." His hand touched his gun and he said: "Let's go."

EWELL GOT slowly to his feet, eyes expressionless. Then he shrugged his heavy shoulders and lumbered through the door.

Brady went by Dill without looking at him. He was pulling on a heavy sheepskin coat. The horns of the locket hooked briefly on it.

Steve Dill walked warily out into the saloon.

The gunslingers turned as a man, and tensed when they saw Dill.

"He's one of us," Brady said laconically.

"The hell he is," a voice said from near the front door. It was the sleek-jawed tobacco chewing youth. The roly-poly sheriff stood silently beside him. Both had recovered their guns.

"He's one of us," Brady repeated.

"Not in my book he ain't. Nobuddy whops me an' boasts about it." He made a sudden move for his holster.

Dill's draw was blurring in its swiftness. The youth's gun had barely cleared leather when Dill's first shot took him over the heart, his second through the nose.

Cordite fumes mixed with the dust in the air. It was stifling in the stillness after the body thumped against the floor.

Dill's hard eyes moved deliberately from face to face.

Brady's shrill voice broke the silence. "See," he said to Ewell, "he's already saved us some money." His laugh was thin, piercing. "That's one salary we won't have to pay."

Ewell looked with grim respect at Steve Dill. "So it would seem," he murmured. "If Dill's promises are as certain as his gun—we'll get along."

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LACKING horses, the sheriff and two of the gunslingers stayed with the corpse. An even dozen men—with Dill, Brady and Ewell up front—started for the hill south of town. Brady rode to Dill's left, and Ewell close to his gun on the right.

The dirty night air was cold, but Dill was sweating. To bluff was one of his greatest stocks in trade. But never across a table had he tried anything as foolhardy and reckless as this.

Brady's slight form swayed tensely in the saddle, fighting an inner fury. Only the threat of an unwritten note stilled his gun hand. For him to show any sort of restraint was remarkable. His fury always had been blind and unreasoning, but not suf-

ficiently unreasoning to overcome his saffron streak and his fear of a rope.

Ewell jolted in his saddle like an incongruous Buddha. His eyes kept sweeping Dill. He was out of his element, and his uncertainty showed it.

But Dill feared what thoughts were churning behind that bland mask. The man was powerful and possessed an agile brain.

Dill rubbed his sweating hand against the saddle pommel, and it came away muddy. His first misgivings stirred within him. After all, he wasn't sure of anything yet—except what nobody else knew—the value of Brady's locket.

Right now, riding through the dust cloud, he gladly would have traded his third of this caper for a third of what the locket represented.

The sudden hard rattle of hoofs beneath him was startling. The horses had been padding through cushioned dust. But now, going up, they trod on hard rock.

"Wind blew all the topsoil away," Ewell said by way of explanation. "We thought it was ruining us all. Instead it uncovered a proverbial mint on Holcomb's spread. Unpredictable mother nature..."

Dill stood upright in his stirrups, his hunch growing that he should have boarded the down train. He was out of his element, had taken a hand in a blind game without rules. Blowing topsoil wouldn't uncover oil. He'd guessed wrong...

Brady held up his hand and the cowboys grouped around him.

"You know what to do," he said. "Fan out, hit that heathen's cabin from all sides an' burn it down. Don't kill him. Dill's goin' to do that."

Dill took his gun out and spun the cylinder. All six were there. He stared at the gun, not liking this at all. To gun a man in a fair fight left him unmoved. Mowing down a defenseless man was something else again. But there was no out for this. His hunch that he would gain nothing from this caper was growing. Nothing possibly good could come out of anything as sordid as this. Silently he cursed the locket. After all it was that that had prompted his trip here. It was a jinx locket; he wouldn't have it now as a gift...

Hoofs pounded sharply, going left and right.

"Let's go," Brady shrilled. He spurred forward at the darker blob that was the cabin. Dill trailed him. Ewell apparently was content to sit still, a reluctant spectator.

STEVE DILL bent far over the saddle. His back, he knew, made a splendid target. So did Brady's for that matter—provided Ewell had guts enough. Dill, with his bluff, had given the banker an excellent reason to kill them both.

A scream of fear rent the night. To Dill's left a form rose from the ground and started to run cumbersomely across the rocks.

"That's him!" Brady shrilled. "Drop him, Dill, drop him!"

Dill turned his horse and pulled it back on its haunches. His hand swept down and when it came back up the gun was in it. He triggered once... twice...three times...and a fourth ...and the jabbering figure kept running down the hill.

Brady cursed and spurred forward. "Get him, Dill, get him!"

Dill sat still, his face wet with sweat. He thought vaguely that at times it's harder to miss a running man than shoot him and still make it look good.

He grimly watched Brady ride down the fugitive, bowl him over with his horse, and turn his flaming gun downward. The cries choked off and the laden air gulped the sound of the shots. Then Brady wheeled, furiously, rowelling his horse.

Ewell puffed up and there was a different look in his eyes now as he studied Dill. Challenge had replaced grudging respect.

Brady came up in a sliding stop. He stood in his stirrups and yelled at Dill: "Yuh crummy bum! Yuh dogged it! Even if yuh did miss four times in the dark yuh had two shots left."

"Yes, I had two left," Dill admitted with false calm. "But I needed the two."

"What in hell for?"

"Maybe you...maybe Ewell... maybe the both of you might have decided to take a gamble against an empty gun. I'm a cautious man."

"The hell yuh are. Yuh spreadin' yore play too far. Someday, Dill, I'll kill yuh."

"But not now," Dill forced a laugh. "Kaycee might hear about it."

Brady glared and spurred for the cabin. Small fires were licking around it. Brady's men were lighting and throwing oil-soaked rags.

Ewell sat still until the flames mounted, then he looked at Dill and luaghed aloud.

"Only the Holcombs left." He waved an expansive arm. "All this hill is mine."

"Ours," Dill corrected.

Ewell looked at him. He opened his mouth, then clamped his heavy jaws. "Now if Brady was out of the way it'd be just two ways," he said suggestively. "He's done what I needed done, done what I couldn't do."

"He hasn't any hold on you?" Dill said, surprised.

"Nothing except that we're in this together. When I found out about this hill I had to have his help. You wouldn't know how it feels to build up a bank—and then see it blow away. All I had left was a lot of worthless mortgages and a little cash when Holcomb talked too much when drunk. Brady came to me after shooting him. I foreclosed on most of the ranchers. Some had to be driven out. I was in favor of that. I wanted the whole hill. Some wouldn't be driven. So Brady started killing. I wasn't in favor of that at first. But a man can get accustomed to anything. I think that I now—too—could kill."

"Like Gates—maybe—when he shows up," Dill prodded. He'd felt a growing desperation. He still lacked a hole card in this murderous game—and it had to be a high one if he was to get out of it alive.

"Like Gates." Ewell nodded. "Holcomb wrote to him, telling him what he'd found. He's Holcomb's only proof to any claim as the discoverer. My own geologists and buyers are coming in in two days. I'll have a clear title for them, with Holcomb frozen out. I don't want to deal with Gates. He's got a rep of being too honest."

STEVE DILL was silent. He knew of a sudden that this gluttonous man was far more dangerous than Brady or any of his hired crew.

"Did it ever occur to you, Dill," he said loftily, "that our horses are standing on a gold mine. Nice feeling, isn't it, with wealth underfoot."

Dill drew a deep breath. So that was it. He had his hole card now and it was a high one. He felt good about it briefly, then that hunch—call it what you will—returned. Maybe it was instinct, but down deep he knew he was being cold-decked. How he knew he couldn't explain, but he was certain as yesterday that he wasn't going to cash in on this game.

Brady came galloping up. Ewell's hand touched his gun butt, then came away. The cabin was a bright torch against the sky.

"The boys are comin' right in to draw their pay," Brady said. "We'll go ahead an' get it ready for them." He spoke direct to Ewell, ignoring Dill.

Ewell nodded his heavy chins. "The faster they get out of town now the better for all of us."

DILL'S HANDS were sweating again. Brady was as good as dead now. He'd never expect a man like Ewell to pull it when Brady was backed only by Dill and the gunslingers had left town.

And he knew for a certainty that the Holcombs would never get that thousand dollars. A man like Ewell just didn't go around giving money away.

He thought of the prim and pretty Mrs. Holcomb and little Joey and felt his anger—hatred possibly—of Ewell growing. It was too bad. The Holcombs seemed like nice people.

But what happened to the Holcombs or Brady was unimportant. What happened to him—Dill—was important. He was riding a whirlwind. He couldn't back down, and he couldn't back out. Ewell had told him too much. Neither would Brady let him quit. He couldn't afford to; Dill knew too much.

He was sure of only one thing—and that was that Brady would side him to keep alive. He believed he had to. But if Brady killed there would be no payoff. Legally Ewell was the owner of the hill.

There was one chance—only one. Have Ewell kill Brady—then kill Ewell. To try to take them both on would be foolish, and Dill decided he already had been foolish enough to last a man a life time—provided there was any more life time.

He realized that his hunch had been right. If his plan worked—and both men died—there would be no payoff. None except—

Dill grinned wickedly in the darkness. Yes, there would be a payoff—a cash one. He had come here to get Brady's locket, and he would get it. Nothing else—just the locket.

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THEY RODE in silence until the horses' hoofs were padding through the dust again.

"Dill," Brady said, "Yore a highbinder, an' I hate yore guts. But I gotta be sided now, an' I have to throw in with you. An' because there's a big pot ready for the takin' I know I can trust yuh. It's me and yuh agin Ewell—and he's holding the joker."

"For a third of a mine I sure can be trusted," Dill admitted. "In fact almost anybody could be trusted for that."

Ewell chuckled deep in his belly. He seemed happy, sure of himself.

"Dill," he said, "you're a man of nerve, and I admire a man of nerve. And I know you are not much of a fool. Was your threat of Brady the only ace you held to declare yourself in on this deal? I hardly believe that, because if Brady died you would be holding an empty hand."

Steve Dill had been expecting that question, but not until a showdown was imminent. Had it been asked earlier he wouldn't have had an answer. Now he knew all the answers. And topping a bluff with another bluff always had paid off handsomely—or disasterously.

"That note concerns more than Brady's caper in Kaycee," he said slowly. "I met one of the ranchers you chased off. He told me all about the mine that hill held. And he told me all about you as well as Brady. Such things might be hard to prove, but if anything happens to me and the law comes for Brady it's certain you'll be looked into, upside and downside, outside and inside. I don't think you could take that."

"I probably couldn't," Ewell admitted.

Brady slapped his palm on the pommel of his saddle. "Dill didn't kill the chinaman, but that's no never mind. He rode with us tonight—an' that's enough to make him stretch rope, too, if anything goes wrong."

Dill tensed in the saddle. What Brady said was all too true, but Brady's point in bringing up the obvious puzzled him.

"What you driving at?" Ewell asked.

"Just this," Brady said. "Dill has cut hisself a piece of pie. Might as well admit it. He ran a fast brand for a third part. Now those papers callin' for a two-way split hafta be changed to three ways. Yuh'll change them thataway while I'm payin' off the men. An' all three 'a' us will sign 'em—tonight."

"No," Ewell protested. "There's no hurry. The Holcombs haven't left town yet."

"You can kill Holcomb, just like the others," Dill suggested.

Ewell shook his head. "No. We don't know what he wrote to Gates when he asked him to come here to look the hill over. He's got to be chased legally, and we still got a day or so to do it that way."

"We're signin' that three-way paper tonight," Brady shrilled. "That done," he said craftily, "there wouldn't be no point in any of the three of us drillin' each other. Thataway we could stop distrustin' each other an' stand together fer a change."

"Maybe you're right," Ewell said. His big belly heaved as he chuckled to himself. "I'll go right over to the bank and draw up the paper."

Dill went wary. This sounded all right, but it was too easy. Something was wrong. His hunch was a full-blown thing now. There was nothing but disaster in this setup. There wouldn't be any chips that a man could cash in.

They dismounted in front of the saloon. Ewell went to the bank and returned carrying a bag of money. The roly-poly sheriff followed him around like a woebegone puppy.

Standing behind the bar, Brady started to count the money in piles. He paid the two gunslingers in the saloon, gave each a bottle of whiskey and instructions to ride—as of now.

The firebugs straggled in one by one. All got money, a bottle and the same instructions. It was like demobilizing an army, Dill thought, and possibly as risky.

Up the street a horse whinnied.

EWELL PUT his drink down suddenly and waddled to the door and looked out. He came back, his face mottled, breathing heavily.

"There's five horses before the hotel," he rumbled. "It must be Gates and his party."

Frowning, Brady shook his head. "Gates is a rich man, not a saddle bum. An' he's an old man, too old to make a hard ride in this damned territory. Those riders are tough men, with guts. I don't like it."

Ewell looked at Dill. "They figure you aren't one of us after what happened to you today in that hotel. Go up there and see what you can find out. I'll wait here for you."

"You'll go to the bank," Brady shrilled, "and fix up a three-way paper. Yuh own all of that hill except Holcomb's spread. There's still plenty in this for all of us even if Holcomb manages to hold on. In mines those rich veins run all over hell and gone. Go fix up that paper. Me—I'm playin' this safe an' I want to keep alive."

Ewell stared levelly at Brady, and his face turned a dull angry red. Finally he turned to Dill. "You go to the hotel, I'll go to the bank." Then to Brady: "Pay off the rest of the men and get them out of here quick—all of them."

"Mean me too," boss?" the sheriff

asked fawningly from the far end of the bar.

Ewell considered. "You'll be the last to go—but you're leaving tonight. In the meantime come with me to the bank. There may be trouble."

He jerked his chin at Dill and the three men stepped out into the dusty street.

Dill's hands were flexing, clenching and unclenching. He was hemmed in, but he still had an ace for his hole card and he might be able to cash in on it. His hunch said otherwise.

"Find out all you can," Ewell instructed. "If its Gates and his men find out what they know about that vein, how rich it is, and how far it extends."

"It's pretty hard to tell about a vein of gold," Dill murmured. "But I'll find out all I can."

He wasn't certain but he thought Ewell drew a sudden hissing breath. He was sure that the sheriff's feet stumbled in the dust.

"Yes, do that, Dill," Ewell said grimly. "And don't take too long. Everything has to be wound up in a hurry now."

Dill went to the hotel, and pushed open the door to the lobby. The warning gong inside his head was sounding louder and louder.

Five men were talking to Mrs. Holcomb.

One was tall, angular, stooped. Dill saw only him, and his thoughts tumbled in turmoil.

This was the man who had been following a long trail in quest of the locket Brady possessed. This was the man whom Dill had intended to swindle for a life of ease. This was the sad-faced mining king, Kendall, a Gates man.

Dill's heels slapped hard against the lobby floor. Heads turned but briefly. No caution was apparent, the talk was free, open for anyone to hear.

"...and Gates turned your husband's letters over to me," he was saying. "I was coming here—looking for

something else—and decided to check that hill again. My men already had done so five years ago. I decided to do so without any fanfare. That's why we came by horse. Well, we looked it over again today. There's a vein there alright, but it's a false vein. It is hardly worth the labor it would cost to get it out. I'm sorry, Mrs. Holcomb, but—like I told your husband—but that's the way it is?"

"Where is my husband?" Mrs. Holcomb said calmly. Dill admired her. Her voice was steady, her emotions under control, but her eyes were deep pools of disappointment.

"He said something about 'all this murder and burning for nothing' and went outside," Kendall said. "He took the news pretty hard."

"Oh no, no he can't," Mrs. Holcomb said, surging to her feet. Her composure was gone. "Why didn't you stop him? He's gone after Brady, and in his condition he hasn't a chance. This hope of the mine was all that controlled him after Brady and his riders burned down our home. He'll be killed! I know he will!"

STEVE DILL pivoted fast and returned to the street. His long steps made thudding sounds on the dust-covered boardwalk. They were precise,

urgent, rapid—those of a man who had made an irrevocable decision.

He had to reach Brady before Holcomb did. He was going to do Holcomb a favor. He—Dill—would kill Brady.

There was nothing Quixotic about his intention. He'd never done a deliberate favor for anyone, even himself. Suckers didn't deserve favors...

No, nothing like that. But he did hope he was in time just so grief wouldn't merge with the disappointment in Mrs. Holcomb's eyes.

If Holcomb started a ruckus—and killed or got himself killed—the shots were sure to attract Ewell and the sheriff and maybe Kendall and his men. All would be witnesses.

And it was bad policy to steal a man's locket in front of witnesses, especially if one of them was Kendall.

He walked faster, his twitching hand caressing the butt of his gun. He had to get to Brady first—and he had to get to him alone—for a strictly private shooting.

Light streamed from the batwings of the saloon, and Dill paused. That hunch that he wasn't going to realize any cash on this deal persisted. It already had proved correct as far as the mine thing was concerned.

He wondered vaguely where the crippled Holcomb was hiding. The doomed town was utterly quiet, like it already had died. He supposed that Holcomb planned a bushwhacking, that Ewell and the sheriff were in the bank, that Brady was alone in the saloon. That accounted for even the lack of voices in the dusty air.

He smashed his shoulder against the batwings and took a hasty step inside, and stilled the urgency of his gun hand. He hadn't bargained for this.

Brady and the sheriff and Ewell were standing at the end of the bar, their faces still, their eyes set in flat opaqueness.

There were no papers on the bar. Dill looked at Ewell.

"It was a good bluff, Dill," Ewell said. "You almost had me believing you that you had left a note about us. But you lied, you didn't know."

DILL KEPT his arms free from his sides. His hunch had been right. The ace he'd thought he held for a hole card was strictly a space deuce.

"An' I'm shore now, too, Dill, that you ran a bluff on me," Brady said. "I'm goin' to kill yuh for that. There'll be just a two-way split—not three."

"Why?" Dill asked. He didn't care about the answer, but he needed time. He kept angling to his right for the protection of this end of the bar. A man facing three guns would need all the protection he could muster.

"Because you didn't even know the kind of a vein the wind had uncovered." Ewell said. "In fact you didn't know a thing, and took a hand in this game on nothing more than nerve. We'll see now how much nerve you got Dill. It was copper, not gold."

Dill saw Brady's right arm move beneath the bar, and he leaped for the far corner at his end, clawing for his gun.

Ewell must have been holding a hidden gun all the while he talked, for it was up on the bar almost as fast as Brady's lightning draw.

The sheriff, standing clear of the bar, reached, too—and Dill knew his luck had run out. His hunch had been right. There had been nothing worthwhile in this whole miserable, damned deal.

His gun bucked in his hand almost simultaneously with Brady's, twin flames lancing at each other down the polished bar surface.

BRADY'S shot caught him high on the left shoulder, making him turn. Brady reared backwards as if shoved by a gigantic hand; Dill fired again at the thin chest, and Brady fell backwards.

Ewell's shot was high and wild,

strictly amateurish. But the sheriff's was not; it sawed along Dill's ribs after making splinters fly from the bar.

Dill pivoted to meet the sheriff's fusillade, gambling that Ewell would miss again.

Behind him, to his left, there was a sudden blasting of a gun. From the corner of his eye he saw Holcomb, pale-faced and frightened, awkwardly triggering.

Dill fired two rapid shots, and the sheriff bent far over. Ewell's gun was blasting in wild panic.

Dill took deliberate aim and fired. Before the sound of the shot he heard Holcomb gasp.

Ewell took a short staggering step backward, then fell forward. The sheriff was bent far over, swaying. Finally he toppled.

Dill turned his gun to face Holcomb. Holcomb was coming blindly toward him, blood bubbling from his mouth. His gun slid from his hand and bumped hollowly against the floor in the sudden quiet. He grabbed for the bar, missed it, and fell on his face.

Ewell stepped over him. His long legs took him to the far end of the bar.

He was dizzy with pain and shock, but he holstered his gun, bent over Brady and tore the locket from his watchchain. He pocketed it, then turned and started on uncertain legs for the batwings.

They came open in his face and the sad-faced Kendall and his men came in. They were followed by Mrs. Holcomb. She took one look—and screamed.

Dill wasn't sure whether his shoulder or his ribs or her scream hurt him the most.

"He—he was a good man," he told Kendall. Then he repeated it in a crazily loud voice. "He helped me. I couldn't have come off top dog without him."

HE DIDN'T know whether that was true or not. But Holcomb's gun—if only because of the distraction it had caused—had given him a split second advantage.

He pushed past Kendall and weaved up the boardwalk to the hotel. The clerk was standing outside. Steve Dill ignored him, and went inside.

Little Joey sat white-faced on the edge of a chair in the lobby. He looked at the blood running down Dill's left arm and opened his mouth in a soundless cry.

Dill fumbled in his pocket and placed the locket in the boy's hand.

"Remember now," he said. "Your daddy gave you that. Tell the tall man that; it belonged to your daddy. Do you understand? It belonged to your daddy."

"Sure it belonged to daddy, deck pounder," the boy said calmly. "It always did belong to daddy until he lost it in a poker game. Did you win it back for him?"

"Sure—sure—that's it," Dill said, aghast. "I won it back for him." He tried to laugh but that hurt too much.

Abruptly he sat down. He recalled how Kendall had been pointed out to him in Aurora, and of the amazing hunt the mining king was conducting. He'd been a hell raiser once, and his young wife had deserted him, taking their son with her. Years later Kendall had traced that son to an orphanage in St. Joe. But the boy had been adopted by an unknown family years before. The orphanage had remembered the curiously designed locket that had been part of his belongings.

Following every rumor concerning such a locket, Kendall had come to this district.

Well he'd found it, Dill thought grimly. All he had to do now was come back to the hotel and he'd determine that he had lost his son and gained a grandson.

It could have been different. Had Dill retained the locket, as he had intended to do, Kendall would have

lacked a grandson and found his son, Dill.

"I'd have made a helluva son," Steve Dill told himself. "Me—a high-binder and a chiseler."

His head fell forward and his eyes closed.

When he awoke, Kendall was bending over him. The wounds had been dressed and he was in bed.

"One of my men studied medicine," Kendall explained. "He says you'll recover. I sincerely hope so. This town has been cruel and deadly to everyone but me; the Lord, in his devious way, has made me very happy. I have found my grandson."

"The Lord" Dill told himself, "assisted by Dill's gun." Then, trying to analyze his own unprecedented action, Dill thought that Kendall might be right at that.

Certainly Dill, who wouldn't even give himself a square shake, wouldn't do what somebody had done with that locket.

"The life of a gambler is hard," Kendall said musingly. "All you got out of your trip here was a double wound."

Dill shook his head. "I got something out of this town that I can't ever spend or gamble away. I don't know what you'd call it. But whatever it is, it even beats filling an inside straight flush."

The Case of Wild Bill Bly

By Edward Garner

Swine Herbert, Vulture Guffin, and
A gent called Beady Eye,
Were playing cards as friendly pards,
And drinking fine old rye,
And speaking of the marshal, who
Was handled Wild Bill Bly.

"The marshal's sick," Swine Herbert said;
The Vulture then looked sad,
And Beady Eye turned loose a tear,
In pearl-like lustre clad.
The Vulture wiped a moist eye,
The first time since a lad.

"The marshal's off his rocker now,"
Swine Herbert softly said,
"He thinks we three have robbed some banks,
And taken cattle, fed
By other hands than ours, and left
Some ranchers in the red."

"He needs some treatment," Vulture said,
"The marshal's very ill,
We must prescribe at once to save
Our valued friend, Wild Bill—
I think he needs the medicine
Found in a Colts' lead pill!"

"Not so!" demurred fierce Beady Eye,
"I'm giving you facts straight:
I think the best thing to be done
Is quickly operate—
I have a Bowie knife that will
Do up the job first-rate!"

Beneath a window, Wild Bill's ear
Was hearing what took place,
He came in to the three—he had
A wide smile on his face;
He looked at the three "doctors" who
Consulted on his case.

"I'm feeling much improved," Wild Bill
Informed the quaking three,
"The jail awaits, and when you're in
I'll throw away the key;
So in the event of my relapse
I'll have 'doctors' for free!"

★

WILDERNESS POSSE

by Frank Richardson Pierce

Awkward Jim Wyatt was a laughing stock, and Sam Condon had a plan to upset his engagement to Mary Friend . . .

JIM WYATT arrived at Mary Friend's home in Jeffordville, standing in the saddle and yelling like a painted Indian. He dropped to the ground, ran several yards to check his momentum, then turned up the path as Mary ran down the steps to greet him. "Well," she said, amused, "what triggered all this?"

"I'm twenty-one. My job with the Mesquite City Stage Lines is good as long as I want it. I'll inherit the three thousand dollars my mother left—down payment on the Bar Two-Bits ranch. Or, if you don't want to go ranching right away, I might get a job as deputy United States marshal. And. . .and. . . *Sam Condon is in Mesquite City.*" Unconsciously Jim Wyatt emphasized this bit of information and Mary flushed slightly.

Mary's mother, standing on the porch, wondered about the soft glow on her daughter's face. Was it because Sam Condon, the jewelry drummer, had sparked Mary whenever he was in Mesquite County? Or was it because Sam sold engagement rings to young men in love—young men like Jim Wyatt?

Mrs. Friend had watched these two grow up. Jim was now six feet two inches tall and his one hundred and seventy-five pound body was all hard flesh, bone and muscle. He was rusty-headed, blue-eyed, plain. "Not much for looks, but a man who'd be true," the gossips said. "But he ain't the man for Mary Friend. When that pert little baggage realizes how pretty she is, she'll set her sights high—a wealthy rancher or a big city business man."

Jim Wyatt impulsively kissed Mary. The few words he said made good listening, but what was left unsaid, coupled with his enthusiasm, was eloquent. "Stage leaves in a half hour," Jim told her. "See you in a couple of days or so."

"You're a caution," Mary said. And a half hour later she was again on the porch as Jim, handling the four horses and cracking the whip inches above

their backs rounded the dangerous curve a quarter mile away and began the descent over a series of switchbacks to the lower country, and Mesquite City on the railroad.

Jim turned the express box over to Donner, the agent, and asked, "Has the cattle money come in yet?" He was serious. "Hope it gets here in time for the folks up my way to do their Christmas buying."

"Not yet," Bert Donner answered. "But Sam Condon's in town and that's a sure sign it's due. It's like robins arriving in the north is sign of spring."

The routine was the same each year. The small ranchers in the Jeffordville region drove their cattle into the little community, then made a community project of driving them down to the Mesquite City pens where cars were waiting. No cattle arrived in Chicago in better shape. When the money came to the Mesquite City Bank, it was turned over to Donner. Bert included it in the next express shipment to Jeffordville.

Once an outlaw gang had tried to rob Gill's bank at Jeffordville. The four men were still there—buried outside the cemetery, as unfit to rest with the honest folk inside the fenced grounds. And once a minor band of outlaws had held up the stage; they died before they could reach safe country and scatter. It had been established as next to impossible to take the region's cattle money, except small amounts in poker games. And though it was a challenge among old-time outlaws, and reckless young men seeking a reputation, they invariably gave up the idea after personal inspection of the Mesquite City-Jeffordville road. It wasn't outlaws that worried the region's economy; it was the price of cattle. The last two years had been below average, but this year had been good. The town's merchants had laid in a good supply of goods for the Christmas trade, and Sam Condon was ready to reap a harvest.

JIM WYATT didn't like Sam because of his interest in Mary Friend, but Condon carried the best stock of rings at the lowest price. Jim hailed him on the street and asked, "You got something in engagement rings for a hundred dollars?" Sam assured him that he had exceptional bargains at that figure. "I'll be along in an hour, Mr. Condon."

Jim turned into the McNeil Building and climbed the stairs to Judge McNeil's law offices. The lawyer was in his sixties, an authority on ranch and mining law. As a judge he had been honest, but firm with outlaws. As executor of estates he had carried out the wishes of the deceased to the letter. "Good morning, Jim," he said in his booming voice.

"Good morning, Judge," Jim answered. "I suppose you know why I'm here. I'm twenty-one and my own boss."

"You've been your own boss since your mother died three years ago," the judge said. "But you're now your *legal* boss. What are your plans?"

"Buy the Bar Two Bits ranch and..."

"Oh Jim, not the Two Bits," McNeil interrupted. "Three families have broken their hearts on that in ten years. Give me one good reason why you should buy it?"

"It's five miles from cattle car sidings," Jim said.

"And fat cattle from the Jeffordville ranches pass right by it, so what's the point?"

"Feed lot for lean cattle from the lower country," Jim answered. "Get 'em in shape for the haul to Chicago."

"But it's dry..."

"Good soil," Jim interrupted.

"But scant grass, a few trees in clumps, lots of sage and weeds trying to choke out the grass," the Judge McNeil argued. "You should know that. Hell, boy, when things went wrong with you as a lad, you went to

Two Bits as a hideout; you know what it's like."

"I know," Jim admitted. "I had time to prowl, and dream, and watch the others make mistakes. I even told the Eckly brothers how they could make it pay, but they figured I was just a damned fool kid talking. Well, sometimes a damned fool kid knows the answers..."

"Once in a thousand times," Judge McNeil said.

"This is it. It's my money, and I'm taking the chance," Jim said. "I've plenty of respect for you and so did Ma, but I'm a man grown. I want to put the cabin in shape so Mary and I can be married January first. She's sentimental; that was the date her mother and grandmother were married. They were happy. A year from now is too long to wait."

"Does Mary know all this?"

"Well, not exactly. It's a surprise...the last Christmas at her home, like those her mother and grandmother had— I've heard them talk about it—then a New Years' Day wedding," Jim said.

"Oh hell," McNeil said. "I'm very fond of you, boy. But...well...twenty-one is young; and your mother's will provided you shall receive the estate if, and when, in my judgment you planned to invest it soundly. Two-Bits isn't a sound investment, Jim. The name was given because an owner with a grim sense of humor said it wasn't worth more...lock, stock and barrel. Come to me with a better deal and I'll gladly turn the money over to you. Right now it's drawing ten percent interest. Mortgages, which the bank will buy up any time."

Jim Wyatt grew eloquent, but Judge McNeil was firm. "Then how about giving me a hundred dollars to buy Mary an engagement ring?" he asked.

"The will provides I turn the estate over to you intact, not bit by bit," Judge McNeil said. "After all, Mary and you are young..."

"So were her mother and grandmother when they were married," Jim said. "I heard them say the young years are the precious years. With a girl like Mary, a man can't help but win."

"Give yourself time for a little more testing and seasoning and then come to me," Judge McNeil said. "I'm sorry." He studied him astutely for reaction, for signs of depression or defeat. He saw only grimness.

"I'll figure something else," Jim said, "there's more'n one way to skin a cat."

DOWN ON the street he counted his money—sixty dollars and his next payday a month away almost. He went directly to Sam Condon's room. The latter was all smiles. *Dude clothes,* Jim thought, *waxed mustache, perfumed; bay rum on his hair and a warm smile until you look into his eyes. There you see the real Sam Condon a slick cuss and cold blooded.*

"I'd like to pay fifty dollars down and fifty dollars a month from now," Jim said getting down to business. "I'm driving stage these days."

"I guess that can be arranged," Sam said. He opened a silver casket, lined with blue plush. This casket, which he insisted was a family heirloom, was eloquent in its way—it gave the glittering diamonds within an added touch. As if they were jewels belonging to crowned heads and brought forth for special occasions. The ranch women, and the men too, were impressed. Sam's timing was perfect. When he arrived at the time the cattle money was in the ranchers' hands, they bought the more expensive rings; or those who doubted they could afford it, and shook their heads, weakened and bought the cheaper ones.

"Now here's a fine ring," Sam said, "exactly one hundred dollars. Say, who is the lucky girl?"

"Mary Friend."

"Mary Friend? You aren't serious?" And the hardness came to Sam's face.

"Be honest; doesn't Mary deserve better than... *you?"*

"Yes, *me* or *you* or *anyone* else," Jim said.

This oaf, Sam Condon thought, *even thinking of marrying Mary Friend—killing her off on a ranch...and I'm going to tell him so. Still, there must be a better way. And there is.*

He got his temper under control. "Mary's very tender hearted. She feels sorry for you, and has all through your life. Think back, Wyatt and ask yourself if you're being fair. Think of what she's done for you over the years. Think it through sometime when you're driving stage and the horses are jogging along. That's the time to think things out."

Jim's face was impassive, and he made no comment, though he wanted to tear this smug drummer apart. "At times I thought *I* had a chance with Mary," Sam continued. "I could treat her right; she'd want for nothing.

"Think it through," he repeated, "then ask yourself if, as a fair man—and you are a fair man—if you're treating Mary right." He smiled grudgingly. "That's all."

"I'll buy the diamond," Jim Wyatt said. Their eyes met and clashed; they were like two men in a poker game. "Or don't I get it...fifty dollars now and fifty next pay day."

"What size ring, Wyatt?"

"One that'll fit the tip of my little finger is the right size," Jim answered.

Sam Condon had always considered the possibility of a road agent holding him up. Planted among the fine rings were several fake rings that resembled the others; in a brief time the gold would turn green. And any jeweler seeing the stone would pronounce it glass. It was possible a road agent might be trapped by such a ring; it was possible such a ring might laugh Jim Wyatt out of the country.

"Here's the very ring, Wyatt," he said. "Fifty dollars down and fifty next pay day. Your word is good enough for me." The ring was worth five dollars. *The biggest profit I've ever made,* Sam thought.

HE SAW JIM to the door, then waited at the window as the stage driver crossed to Johnson's Livery Stable. In a few minutes he emerged and drove over to the express office where the box was loaded aboard. Then the passengers got on and the stage departed with crackling whip, pounding hooves, rumbling wheels and slowly settling dust. Condon grew thoughtful. Very thoughtful.

As the horses settled down for the long climb the jewelry drummer's words worked on Jim Wyatt like a poison. The charge that she had always felt sorry for him, hurt.

His thoughts went back to school and the Christmas exercises. He was too tall, too thin, and his sleeves were too short and there were visible socks between his shoes and the bottoms of his pants. He had outgrown them. But he got up and started in a scared, halting voice. " 'T'was the night before Christmas, when all through the house. Not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse, and...and...and..." He had faltered, turned red, his mind had gone blank and though his lips formed the words, nothing came from them. Some of the children, then the adults had laughed. He had stood as though paralyzed, then fled. And little Mary Friend had jumped to her feet with blazing eyes.

"Shame! Shame!" she had cried furiously. "All of you. Big and little. He was trying to do something he wasn't made for doing. Shame. All of you."

A hush had followed, and many squirmed and laughter had died as though sliced through with a knife.

Always Mary had defended him so furiously that gradually folks hesitated to laugh or make fun of Jim Wyatt when she was around.

Jim remembered other things, too, "Mary should go with other boys and

get experience and not tie herself down to the likes of Jim Wyatt," they said. Or, "She'd like to quit him but she's afraid he'll get discouraged and never amount to a hill of beans. That would be on her conscience."

"It's all enough to make a man go out and get drunk," Jim said to himself. The stage rumbled past the Two Bits and he looked at the run-down place with the weeds taking over the pasture, the truck garden, the rose garden one brave woman had planted. Some of the cabin windows were broken. Someone had boarded them up. Jim was that someone. He closed his eyes and the place was cleared—nice clean windows, smoke from the chimney, washing on the clothes line, cow, horses and acres of green pasture where lower country cattle could fatten up.

He left it behind, opened his eyes and devoted himself to driving. Horseshoe Bend was three miles ahead. The road here was narrow and curved so sharply that the leaders of the jerk-line freight teams were out of sight of the wheelers and driver. The ruts were deep as though to hold wagons from skidding over the brink on the downgrade trips. The descent was the dangerous one, requiring expert handling of the lines and brakes.

LATER, HE pulled into Jeffordville and turned the express box over to the agent. "Any big money in it?" the latter asked. "Folks are getting mighty anxious. Need the money for bills and what not."

"Only a little. Next time, maybe," Jim answered. He put up the horses, washed the dust and grime from his body, got into his best suit, borrowed a rig from a friend and drove out to Mary's.

"You're up to something Jim Wyatt," she accused when they had driven a short distance from her home. "You can't fool me."

"I'll never try," he said, wrapping the lines around the whip. The horse would amble along without attention from the driver. He fished the plush box from his pocket and opened it.

"Oh Jim!" she exclaimed, and impulsively kissed him.

He put the ring on her finger and she looked at it a long time, then turned and kissed him again. "I guess I'm the happiest man in the world," he said. "Fact is, I know it."

"Has the money come yet?" she asked. "Folks have made out Christmas lists."

"Next trip, maybe," he said.

"There's a nip in the air," she said. "It'd be nice if we had a White Christmas."

"Nice," he agreed, "but hard on the stage drivers and freighters. The grade from Horse Shoe bend can be mighty bad when there's snow." He looked at her curiously. "You're as spooky as mare with a colt and catamounts around. What's the matter?"

"I can hardly wait to show Ma my ring," she said.

"Then we'll show her," he said, turning around as soon as he found a wide place.

He was nervous as he followed Mary into the house. Mrs. Friend smiled gently. "I've seen this coming for years." Then she kissed Mary and Jim.

He was puzzled as he drove home. "Mrs. Friend didn't say she was happy; she just said she'd seen it coming. And I suppose the cats will say I didn't give Mary a chance to back out because I gave her the ring without warning. If the good Lord gives me strength and spares me, Mary will live high on the hog and it'll happen in three, four years. They'll see. I'll *show* 'em."

WHEN JIM WYATT pulled out of Mesquite City a week after he had given Mary a ring that would turn green, Sam Condon and three others rode in the stage coach. Ace Kenwood, a young rancher, rode with Jim. And there was lots of money and Condon's

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casket of diamonds in the express box. A shotgun loaded with buckshot; and a six-gun also rode beside Jim. "Nothing ever happens," Jim said; "not any more. Badmen look at the graves and change their minds. But the guns give me a nice feeling."

They passed the Two Bit ranch and Jim indulged in dreams, then went on. Nothing happened on the Horseshoe Bend grade, but the stage moved rapidly on the run toward Trout Creek. "The rest you gave the horses while the passengers looked at the scenery from Horseshoe Bend done 'em good," Ace Kenwood said. "They're full of prunes."

"Something wrong with the brakes," Jim said.

"Hey!" Condon yelled. "You gone crazy? The stage will run over the horses. I'm getting out." He jumped, followed by the others.

"Condon's yellow," Ace said. "I know the kind of driver you are." They rounded the next sharp curve and just when Jim thought the coach might tip and pitch over the grade, the inside rear wheel came off. As the axle dug into the road, the wheel bounced between horses and bank, hit a hump in the road then bounded over the rim to rocks far below. Jim brought the excited horses to a stop, and Ace whistled. "Only the deep rut kept the stage from going over back there. The lurch pulled the wheel right off."

Sam Condon and the others came at a trot. "What went wrong, Wyatt? You young wild fools take too many chances. Now what?"

"First I'll take a look at the wheel," Jim answered. "If it's smashed, then we'll get down to Craig's place on Trout Creek and wait until another wheel can be brought from Mesquite City."

"Good thing I brought my fish tackle and basket along," Condon said. He turned to the others. "Mighty fine fishing in these parts. Streams low this time of the year. And if there's a breakdown I get myself a mess of trout."

"And the roads follow the streams so usually there's fishing convenient to the breakdown," a passenger said. They followed Jim to the brink and watched him descend a hundred feet.

"No use," Jim shouted. "Wheels smashed." He returned to the coach and examined the axle. "Nut's gone. That's why the wheel came off. And one shoe is gone. Looks queer."

"I'll borrow a horse from Craig," Ace said, "and ride back."

Jim cut a sapling and using it as a lever lifted the axle clear of the road, then lashing the lever to the stage body, proceeded slowly to Craig's little store. "Make yourself comfortable," Jim advised his passengers. "It'll be three or four hours."

"I'm going fishing," Condon said. "I'll get enough for all of us. Know where they bite as fast as you can bait the hook."

IT WAS LATE when Jim pulled up at the express office and unloaded his passengers and the express box. "I'll take the trout to my hotel," Condon said, "and come back for my jewel casket."

"Good," the agent said. Jim drove off to put up his team.

He had just finished when the express agent, Sam Condon and Phil Totman, the deputy marshal, came up. "What happened, Jim?" the agent asked. "You started with ten thousand in gold coin, twenty thousand in greenbacks and. . ."

"And my casket with more'n fifteen thousand in diamonds," Condon cut in. "The greenbacks and the diamonds are gone. What was the matter? Gold too heavy to pack off."

"I never left the stage from Mesquite City to here, except to look over the bluff for the wheel, and you all saw me," Jim answered. He was stunned and scared. "How could it disappear."

"While I was fishing, and the others were chewing the fat with Craig, you were alone with the express box," Con-

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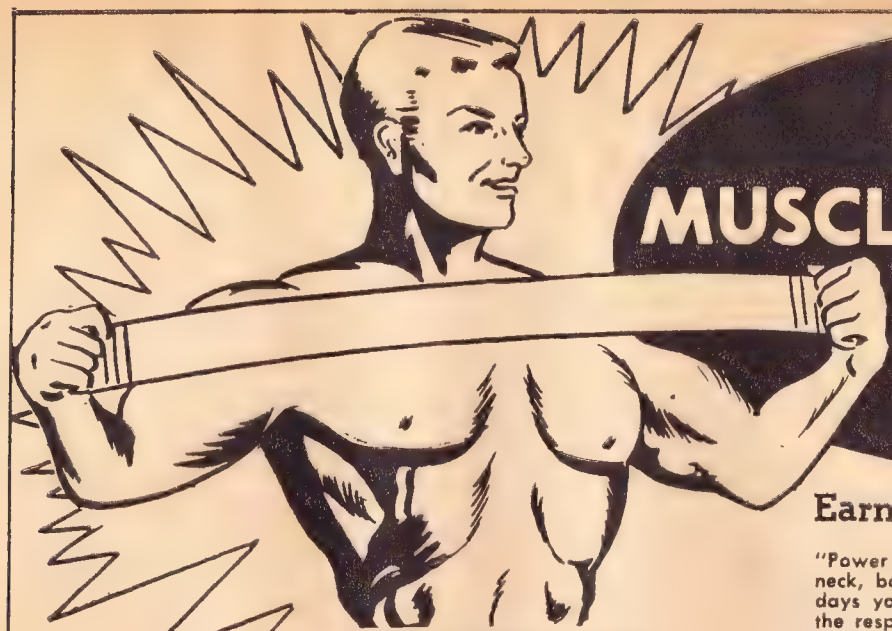

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don snarled. "You'd better admit you stole the stuff. You aren't smart enough to get away with it."

"I just don't know," Jim said heavily. "Was the lock tampered with? I don't even have a key."

"It wasn't tampered with," Condon said. "It was unlocked. the stuff stolen, then locked. You did it at Craig's. Lock him up Totman; his kind will confess."

"Oh here you are," Mary said, breathlessly. "We're holding supper for you, Jim. Heard you had a breakdown."

"Jim ain't going anywhere, Mary," Condon said, "except to Federal prison. He stole money, my diamonds and no telling what else."

"I don't believe it," Mary said hotly. "I won't insult Jim by asking if it's true. I know it isn't."

"That's just what I expected of you, Mary," Condon said. "You've fought this big oaf's battles all your life. But this one you'll lose. I don't want to hurt your feelings, but you know what effect this will have on Jeffordville and the ranchers."

She turned pale. The local bank couldn't stand such loss and some of the ranchers with mortgages would surely go under. The bank, which normally might see them through, couldn't. The merchants couldn't afford to extend credit for Christmas present purchases. "It's like throwing a rock into a pond," she said. "The ripples go in all direction, and don't stop."

Jim took her into a corner. "Don't help me this time. Let me work this out alone. You believe me innocent don't you?" She nodded. "Then let me work it out. I've my pride."

He turned to the deputy marshal. "Whatever happened, happened near Craigs."

"Well how helpful," Condon sneered. "Tell us more."

"Take a posse and search around the

[*Turn To Page* 84]

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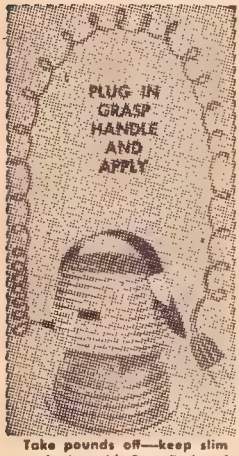

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buildings and along Trout Creek," Jim urged.

"Wouldn't it be sensible to take us there?" Condon suggested. "Jeffordville ranchers could have a real Chirstmas. Otherwise...none. I'm selfish about this. I want to get my diamonds back and make some sales. And that casket is a family heirloom."

"Come along," the marshal said. "Jail's the place for you."

"Is he safe there?" Condon asked. "When the word gets around there's liable to be a lynching."

LAWMEN FROM Mesquite City joined Phil Totman and posse's were formed. They searched the creek bank near Craig's, and all of the buildings in the vicinity. They watched for disturbed grass and brush for signs of recent digging and found none. Then men who had known Jim Wyatt since boyhood came to the cell door. "Tell us the truth, Jim," they pleaded. "If in a moment of weakness you slipped, tell us, and we'll give you another chance." Then Judge McNeil came; and to all Jim insisted he was innocent.

"I talked to him like a father," Judge McNeil said.

"You should've talked like a Dutch Uncle," Condon said. "Put pressure on him and he'll crack. He's forfeited any consideration from people who've watched him grow up. And why Mary backs him up puzzles me. She's babied the oaf all her life. It's time he stood on his own hind legs."

"You're bitter," Judge McNeil said coldly.

"I should be. I'm taking a big loss," Condon said.

Ten days passed without incident but the town noticed Condon and Mary Friend were seen together frequently. "You can't expect her to be loyal to a man who double-crossed his home town," the jailor said to Jim. "You're lucky, maybe. The ranchers were getting mad and organizing a necktie par-

[*Turn To Page* 86]

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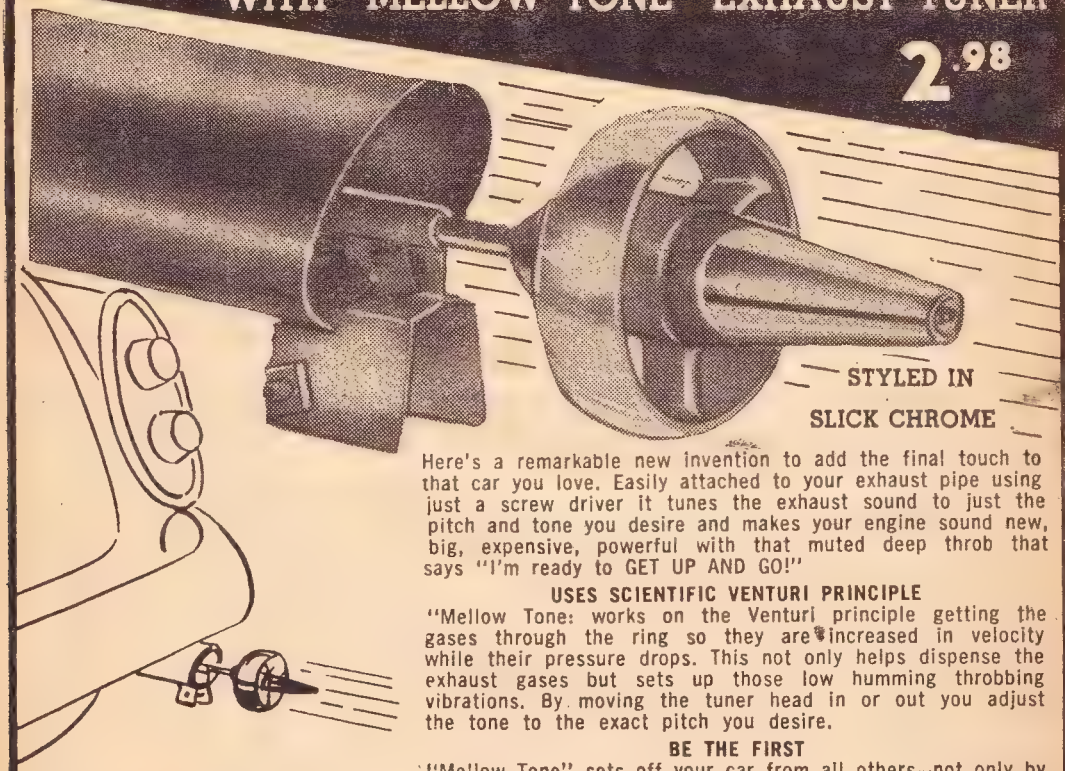

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ty. Mary talked them out of it. You owe her plenty."

"I owe all her I can do for her as long as I live," Jim said.

Snow began falling two days later. "We wanted a white Christmas," many said angrily, "and what a Christmas it will be. I'd like to get my hands on that Jim Wyatt. I hear he paces his cell, all bottled up. No sign of cracking."

The snowfall was followed by overcast weather to further depress the community. It was then that Jim sent for Mary. "Don't breathe a word of this to anyone, but tell Phil Totman I'm ready to do something about the crime."

She caught her breath sharply. "I'll tell him."

"Is there a reward?" he asked

"Condon offered a thousand dollars. Put the money up in the bank," Mary answered. "The Jeffordville bank posted a thousand dollars reward. But the money will not be paid to anyone involved in bringing off the robbery."

"Smart people," Jim said briefly.

"I've been going out with Condon," Mary said. "I. . ."

"You had your reasons," Jim interrupted. "And so. . ."

"You bet your boots I had my reasons," she said with feeling. "He's so worldly, so sure of himself. He's educating me. Well, I'll see Totman. Anything else?"

"Yes, tell Totman to invite Judge McNeil to go along," Jim answered.

THEY MET Judge McNeil at Craig's at daybreak and Jim led off over snow unmarked except by bird and animal life. They moved slowly, with Jim drifting back and forth under Totman's watchful eye.

He called them at last and said, "What do you see?"

"Animal tracks converging on this point," Totman said.

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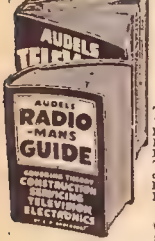

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WESTERN ACTION

"Dig," Jim said. "The wilderness posse has done its part."

Totman dug away the snow and uncovered a hole, evidently dug by paws equipped with claws. The shovel struck something hard. "Metal," Totman said. "What's this?"

"Condon's casket," Jim said. "Keep digging." A tin box came up next. It, like the casket was locked

"Talk," Totman said.

"I knew that I didn't steal this stuff," Jim said. "So it must be Condon. He was the only man who left Craig that day. It would be easy for him to slip the loot into his fish basket and take it up the creek and bury it."

"And easy for you, too," Totman said.

"I was taking a chance of convicting myself when I proposed this, but something had to be done," Jim said. "Maybe I have convicted myself."

"I've been working on the case," Mary said. "My engagement ring began to turn green. I had a jeweler at Mesquite City look at it; he said the setting was glass. I knew that either Jim had given me a cheap ring, or Condon had cheated Jim. And I know Jim, so Condon was back of all this."

"Yes, but the stuff came from the express box," Totman said. "Explain that."

"Condon made the trip many times. Outlaws had failed to rob the express box. Probably he thought he was smarter than outlaws. It was a challenge," Jim said. "Somehow he got a duplicate key, unlocked the box, helped himself, locked the box again while the rest of us were checking the wheel. And knowing the route, he probably removed the nut while everyone was looking at the scenery at Horseshoe Bend. He knew the wheel would come off somewhere downgrade. And that we'd go on to Craig's."

"You had a lot of faith in wild animals showing the way," Totman said.

[*Turn To Page* 90]

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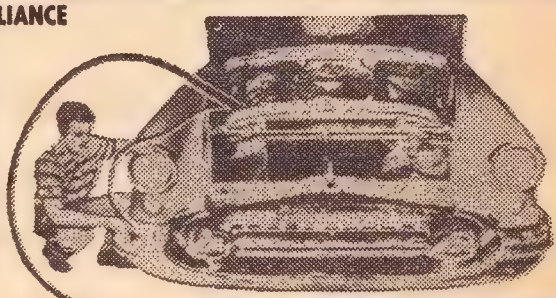

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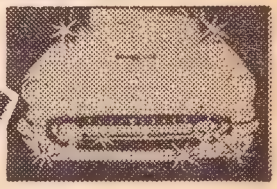

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"The public isn't going to take much stock in it."

"Can't help it," Jim said. "When I felt nobody wanted me except Ma and Mary, and I took to the woods, I learned that animals like to dig up things folks bury; and that fresh snow, when it's tracked up, shows the way. Just as I know Two Bits ranch has water that can be pumped into flumes to irrigate a couple of hundred acres of land in dry years and lots more'n that in wet years. I've said my piece and said it much better than 'A Visit From St. Nicholas.' Your move, Totman."

At noon the next day Totman called in Sam Condon. "Here's your casket," he said, "open it up." Condon paled and staggered. "Open it up!" Totman's voice was threatening. Reluctantly Condon opened it up. The casket was half filled with diamonds.

"You swore it was full. Only you had the key. There was no sign of a forced lock," Totman said. "And what about the express box key, you used and threw away?"

"This town will really have a nicktie party," Mary said, "when it hears what you tried to do to Jim."

"Get me out of here," Condon said. "I'll talk. I played Jim Wyatt for a dumb oaf. It looked like a cinch. I'd lost heavily at poker and had to sell diamonds to pay off. I had to account to my employers, so a robbery seemed the answer. And while I was about it, why not feather my nest for a long time—the express money shipment was the answer. Well, you know the rest. The greenbacks are in the tin box. I couldn't get away with the gold; it was too heavy for a fish basket."

"The reward will come in handy," Jim said, "and I'm claiming it."

"Ironical," Judge McNeil boomed. "And I'm convinced, Jim, you're mansized—something Mary has long known—we'll turn the estate over to you."

[*Turn To Page* 92]

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WESTERN ACTION

"I'll take fifty of it now," Jim said. The judge gave him two twenties and a ten. Jim handed them to Condon. "I'll trouble you for the real ring I paid for. Take off that thing you've been wearing and kept polishing so folks wouldn't know, Mary."

He slipped a genuine ring onto her finger and kissed her. "Now let's get this tin box of greenbacks to the express office so the ranchers can get their Christmas money," Jim said. "And, one more thing, Totman. The express company fired me; how about helping me get a deputy marshal's job. Mary and I will need extra money until we've turned the Two Bit Ranch into..."

"A twenty-dollar ranch," Mary interrupted. "But that's ahead of us. Right now, darling...Christmas shopping."

STAGE TO PERDITION

(*continued from page 7*)

sentiment regarding his plans to run for President. On his trip east he had suffered nothing but hard luck. One stage had toppled into a river to give the great man a good ducking. Another had been knocked over by buffalo back on the Plains, and Greeley had managed somehow to escape with his life. He had twisted an ankle, though. He was limping when he got off the stage at Genoa.

"I have to get in Placerville as soon as possible," he complained to the depot-manager, "for I have a speaking-appointment there tonight."

"We'll get you there," the manager promised. He turned to Hank Monk. "This is your driver, Mr. Greeley."

Hank shook hands warily. He was a little suspicious of people who openly claimed they were famous, and more suspicious of one who intended to run for the nation's highest office.

[*Turn To Page 94*]

ROYAL JELLY, the Queen Bee's Special Food...ITS SECRET OF PROLONGED LIFE!

Leading National Magazines, Newspapers, Syndicated Columnists, Medical Journals, and Report from Medical Congress indicate the benefits of ROYAL JELLY, a "living" high energy food.

Doctors Report "Miracle" Royal Jelly May Change Your Whole Life!

How would you like to awaken one morning and find yourself possessed with a marvelous sense of "well-being," full of New Pep and Vitality? Wouldn't it be wonderful if you could feel increased vigor and enjoy a "new lease on life?" Now ... Scientists say this may happen to you!

Royal Jelly May Mean "New Life" After 40

Reports from Europe tell of an 80 year old Gentleman whose physical condition would make a 50 year old envious. The man regularly partakes of Royal Jelly. According to a book published in England, when Russian Officials sent questionnaires to all the Centenarians (people over 100 years old) in the Soviet Union, more than half of them turned out to be beekeepers.

From France and Germany come amazing Scientific Reports of outstanding results obtained with Royal Jelly. One French Authority writes of women over 40 feeling increased sexual vitality and of a wonderful feeling of "youth and well-being" that resulted from continued use of Royal Jelly.

At this moment, in Leading Universities, Scientists and Nutritionists and Medical Doctors are doing extensive work to determine the exact role that Royal Jelly may play in Your Sex Life, Your Health and Your Emotional Condition. These researchers are especially interested in its effects on those who have passed middle age. They are working on Royal Jelly because this rare NATURAL FOOD has been indicated to contain remarkable Energy and Sex Factors.

Doctor Paul Niehans, famous Swiss Surgeon and experimenter with Hormones says: "ROYAL JELLY is an activator of the glands"... Dr. Niehans discovered that many minor disabilities which bother millions of people such as tiredness, irritability, headaches, insomnia, physical and spiritual convulsions, were easy to treat with the Cellular Therapeutics of the Secretion of the bees which we call Royal Jelly.

Jenasol RJ Formula 60 contains pure, natural Wheat Germ Oil (Vitamin E)

Swallow one CONCENTRATED JENASOL RJ FORMULA 60 capsule daily. They combine 8 important and essential vitamins and minerals as well as the miracle food of the Queen Bee. This capsule dissolves instantly, releasing the super forces of Royal Jelly which go to work immediately and reenforce and healthfully strengthens your own natural functions which may have become deficient.

Effects can be felt more quickly with the double potency SUPER-STRENGTH FORMULA—but satisfactory results are MONEY BACK GUARANTEED with either formula. (The price of ROYAL JELLY has been recently quoted at $500.00 per ounce.)

ROYAL JELLY Wins Approval Before Congress* of 5,000 Doctors

The men of Medical Science who have experimented with Royal Jelly, claim that Royal Jelly will perform the function of INCREASING MEN & WOMEN'S WANING POWERS.

Jenasol R. J. Formula 60, in the opinion of these reputable physicians removes any possible danger for the layman in the use of these powerful, concentrated nutritional extracts. This is the latest and possibly the greatest advance in the history of Medical Science. This combination, created under the strict supervision of a Registered, Licensed Pharmacist, and Medical Doctor, named "Jenasol R. J. Formula 60," makes the use of these amazing elements perfectly safe.

Every man and woman who feels "old" and "played out" before their time should seriously consider the use of "Jenasol R. J. Formula 60" to increase their pep and energy.

Royal Jelly Reported to Help Those Suffering From:

Mental Depression ... Loss of Appetite ... Sexual Weakness ... Digestive Disturbances Headaches ... Decreased Vigor ... Nervousness ... Aches and Pains ... Irritability.

MEDICAL RESEARCH

We have listed below some of the extensive Medical and Laboratory research that has been done with Royal Jelly:

Many authorities still dispute the efficacy of Royal Jelly while others consider it a potential Boon to Mankind.

- *Dr. de Pomiade, 2nd International Congress of Biogenetics, Baden-Baden, Germany: April 5, 1956.
- Dr. Maurice Mathias, Pasteur Institute of Tunisia, October, 1952.
- Cowdry's Problem of Aging, Thomas S. Gardner. (Reprinted from Journal of Gerontology, Vol. 8, No. 3, July, 1953.)
- Analyses of Royal Jelly and Pollen, Nevin Weaver and Kenneth A. Kulken (Technical Contribution, No. 1485 Texas Agricultural Experiment Station.)
- Longevity Factors in Royal Jelly, Thomas S. Gardner. (Reprinted from Journal of Gerontology, Vol. 3, No. 1, January, 1948.)

We make no claims for ROYAL JELLY. We have merely accumulated reports that have been made as a result of experimentation and research by Doctors, Scientists, and Nutritionists in many parts of the world.

The Bosl Laboratories of Europe gave the Doctors of the 2nd International Congress of Biogenetics a great surprise when they confessed that their famous Medical Cream for the skin was prepared with Royal Jelly. The Doctors all knew that with this cream sagging breasts were raised and mamary glands of women were activated.

CAN VITALITY AND SEX DRIVE BE INCREASED WITH ROYAL JELLY?

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Observations by Doctors of the Medical Congress Who Took Royal Jelly and Observed its Use Directly

- Royal Jelly gives new energy to those in a weakened state, and greater vigor, more physical strength and spiritual strength to the healthy.
- Royal Jelly alleviates suffering of men and women in their critical years in a sensational manner.
- Royal Jelly acts on weakened, tired eyes, giving instantly a sensation of new light.
- Feeling of tiredness disappears immediately.
- Royal Jelly gives a feeling of increased sexual drive and energy, especially to men and women over 40.
- Glandular studies may lead to new hope for men and women.
- Royal Jelly produces a pleasing state of relaxed well-being and eases tension.

DISCOVERER OF INSULIN Dr. Frederick Banting

"The most complete Scientific Report on Royal Jelly was prepared under the direction of Dr. Frederick Banting.

"TEXAS A & M COLLEGE has been conducting experiments on Royal Jelly..."

"PROFESSOR G. F. TOWNSEND of ONTARIO AGRICULTURAL COLLEGE is resuming research on Royal Jelly..."

"DR. T. H. McGAVACK has agreed to conduct experiments in Longevity with human beings fed Royal Jelly..."

Life May Begin Again After 40 as Queen Bee's Natural Food Rebuilds Man's Vitality and Drive

Royal Jelly is totally unlike honey, and has baffled scientists since the 1700's. In 1894, some of the mystery was dispelled when Leonard Bordas, a French scientist, discovered that Royal Jelly is secreted by special glands located in the heads of worker bees whose job is to nurse the Queen.

Intrigued by the strange longevity and extraordinary sexual powers of the Queen Bee, leading scientists have been trying to discover the Secret Factor in Royal Jelly that so benefits the Queen Bee.

It is not surprising that Royal Jelly has attracted Medical Attention throughout the world... Here is the substance, the sole diet of the Queen Bee in which lies the secret of the difference between her and the rest of the hive. For the Queen lives to 6 years, whereas the 20 to 40 thousand worker bees and the few hundred drones live but a few short months. The Queen Bee larva looks like all the rest, including those of the female worker bees. But only SHE is fertile, producing some 400,000 eggs annually.

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Here Are Some of the Symptoms of Approaching Old Age which Make Men and Women over 40 feel devitalized and "played out" before their time:

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- Weak feeling
- Vague aches and pains
- Listless, "don't care attitude"
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- Fails to get rest from sleep
- Sexual weakness
- Loss of mental efficiency and ability
- Unable to make simple decisions.

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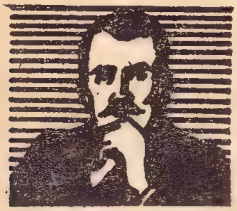

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WESTERN ACTION

"Get there as fast as you can," Greeley said brusquely.

Hank held back a grin. "You'll arrive in Placerville in time." Placerville was on the west side of the Sierras. "Well, all aboard, folks!"

Greeley looked up at the high peaks. "Those mountains are very, very high," he offered.

"There are passes in them," Hank said, "and they're not as high as they look. Want me to help you into the stage, Mr. Greeley?"

Greeley brushed his hand unceremoniously to one side. "I'm old enough to walk," he growled.

Greeley hobbled to the stage. Hank winked at the manager who winked back. Then Hank climbed on the high box, adjusted his boots on the dashboard, got his lines just so, and cracked his whip.

"Hit the collars, hosses!"

UP THE MOUNTAINS the team loped, then slowed to a trot, then a walk. Below them stretched a canyon that seemed bottomless. Then, at the summit, Hank deliberately let the teams loose, standing and hollering for more speed. Away the heavy Concord went, swaying and lurching, skidding around the curves with screeching steel rims.

Hank was really pounding out the time.

Then another summit had to be conquered, the teams slowing; once on the divide, Hank Monk repeated the same process—again the teams loped with loose tugs, their driver yelling for more speed. Ahead loomed a curve known as Deadman's Bend, the sharpest cure on the trail. Hank only hoped no other stage was coming toward him, for he intended to hit the curve wide open—which he did.

The heavy stage lurched sickeningly, rocking over on its two outside

[*Turn To Page 96*]

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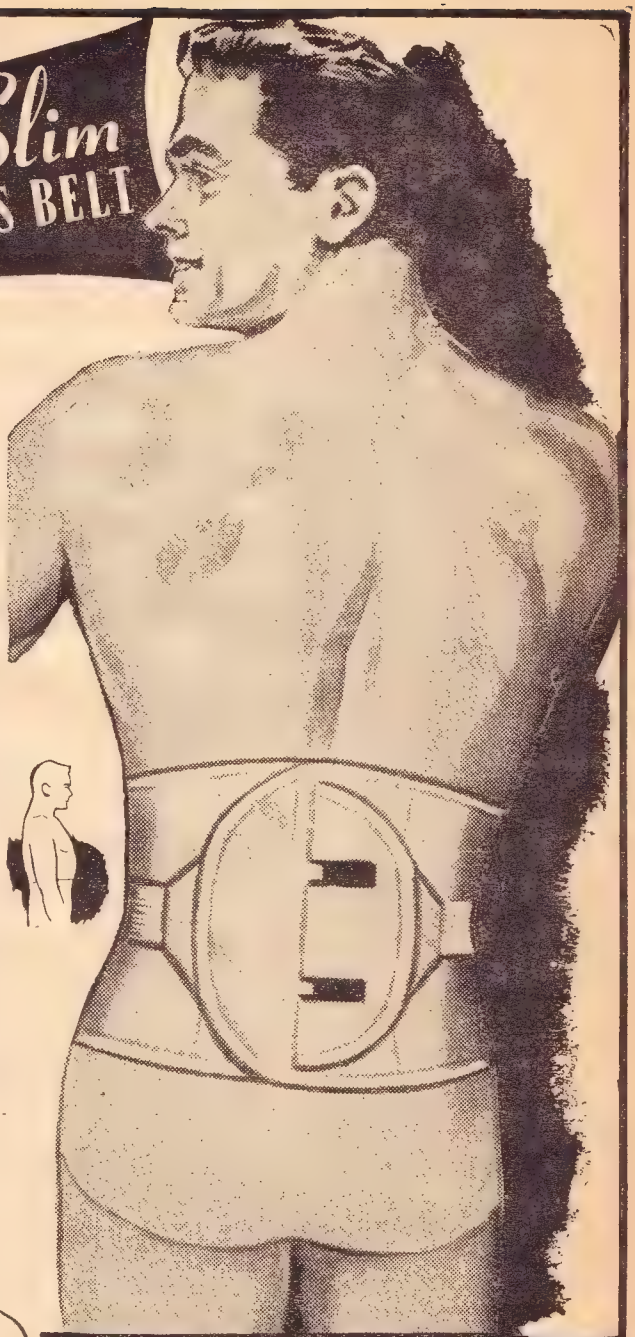

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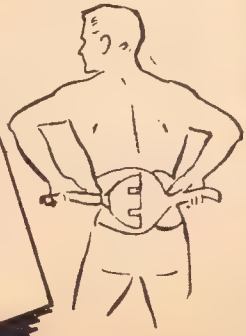

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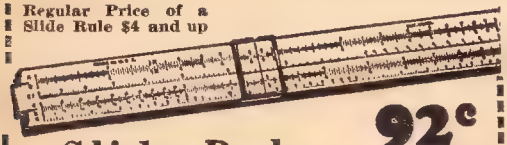

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wheels, the canyon below anything but something nice to suddenly gaze down into. Dust spun upward. For a moment it looked as though the stage would l u r c h off into the abyss. But the inside horses, taking up slack, snapped it around, and all four wheels were again on the road.

Greeley had had enough. He yelled upward, "You trying to kill me, you damned fool?"

Hank grinned crookedly. Devilment twinkled in his brown eyes.

"Hang o n t o your seat, fellow. I'll get you into Placerville on time, *Horace!*"

The word *Horace* did it. G r e e l e y never again opened his mouth, regardless of how reckless Hank Monk drove. When the great man got into Placerville he had an hour to w h i l e away before his speech. He would not speak to Hank. He completely ignored the grinning driver.

Horace, huh?

Hank would have let the matter die at this p o i n t, so historians say, but Greeley was the one who, in numerous lectures, remarked about the impertinence of an uncouth Sierra Nevada stage-driver, who had called him *Horace*. Hank suddenly found himself famous. In fact, some claim he was more famous than Greeley, who ran for the presidency and was soundly defeated.

"My friend, *Horace* Greeley," Hank used to joke, glass upraised. "Good luck to you, *Horace*," he would toast.

Hank was full of jokes. He liked to

[*Turn To Page* 98]

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Yes, an amazing new method has been developed to bring on quick, easy induction of the hypnotic trance. Now, for the first time, you too can benefit from this recent discovery in hypnotic induction.

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tell greenhorns that he was so drunk once on a run he drank water himself and fed whiskey to his horses. The team got drunk and Hank got sober, or they'd never have made the run on time! He had other jokes, too, and most of them were on himself; people liked his jokes very much!

Later, when he was an old man, he asked Greeley for a job, hoping to land something soft through politics, but Greeley would have nothing to do with him—in fact, the editor wrote him a rough letter saying, among other non-complimentary things, that he would "see you ten thousand fathoms in hell than give you a crust of bread."

Plainly Greeley did not like flippant Westerners, especially one who had driven a stage.

FOR TWENTY-eight years, Hank Monk drove stage. With the coming of the overland railroad—which eliminated the Overland Stage—he drove freight-and-passenger runs from the railheads to outflung mining camps. This was the time of the Sierra Nevada gold-bandit but, strangely, there is no record of any bandit holding-up a stage driven by Hank Monk.

But driving-stage required a set of hard, lean and young muscles, and Hank Monk was losing these, for he was reaching sixty. But he liked his work, and so he kept on, and legends grew around him. He did nothing to discourage these legends; in fact, he encouraged them, reveling in their glory.

The only time, he used to say, that he really got reckless was when he gave Horace Greeley the rough ride. Sometimes, in a happy mood, he would drive a little too fast, hollering down good-naturedly to his passengers that he was giving them a "a little of the Greeley treatment!" He was a rather conservative driver during this time of rough drivers. Tooling ribbons on a stage was his business, and he enjoyed his job.

Many a time he was forced to spend forty-eight hours on his box, driving through night and day—through rain and sleet—through sunshine and darkness. He was big-hearted, always rooting for the underdog, and he slipped many a gold piece to some unfortunate, asking no more than a smile and a quick, "Thank you, Hank."

But when he dropped his stage over the rim that day in 1880, he figured he was through—his muscles were too slow and his eyesight was not up to par. Therefore he quit the job he loved.

And he never drove stage again.

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Louis H. Silberkleit (Signature of publisher) Sworn to and subscribed before me this 1st day of October, 1957.

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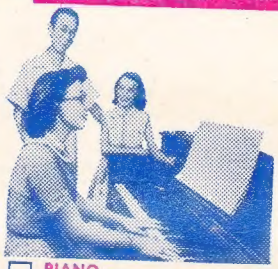

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